

Nancy Takacs

A Tapestry of Telling

Kate Kingston. *The Future Wears Camouflage*, Middle Creek Publishing, 2025.

Kate Kingston's vibrant language is composed of unusual word pairings, metaphors bordering on the surreal, and anaphora, creating a strong voice and rhythmic patterns, immersing the reader in her sensory world. In this book, she revels in wild landscapes, Mexican culture, and women's loves and losses. Exploring celebration and tragedy, these poems question violence.

As a foreword, the proem "Portrait of Mexico" sets the tone for the first section. Mexico is personified in this poem, and Kingston extends the metaphor as she addresses and traces its body, revealing hornets in its mouth and skull in an off-kilter sensuality that continues with "A bell rings in your nostril." "Above your brow an open ocean." "Your tongue tangles with driftwood, thistle, ocotillo." The images suggest the country's beauty, yet a complexity one becomes aware of in the poems we encounter in this section. Hornets humming "in your ear" introduces the idea of impending danger.

Many of the poems in this section focus on a concern for women. "Protest for the Feminicidos, Universidad de Oaxaca" elegizes murdered Mexican women, as Kingston enters the university plaza where women students are embroidering words on banners that tell true stories of domestic violence:

My father killed me . . .

I was a sexual worker . . . The man that exploited me took
my children to punish me.

They found my body in the bushes.
He beat me and strangled me with my bra.

The observant speaker notices an "end-knot after the second letter in Isabela and read[s] only *Is*." In "Photo Journey" Kingston recreates her participation in a celebration of the dead in "a field of tombstones" where she compares women's faces to "urns holding years of ashes." This stark image is juxtaposed with the celebration's joyfulness:

Kestrel

I dance with skeletons
and street dogs, catch my reflection
in the hull of a tuba.
I taste mescal, mole negro, and grasshoppers.

The second section “Carnival of Reeds” transitions to personal poems about parents, a daughter giving birth, cleaning out her mother’s house, and a somewhat humorous past growing up in Wisconsin’s 50’s and 60’s. We remain buoyant in waves of images, just as we do in the first section. In “Gunsmoke and Jack-o-Lanterns,” the poem narrates yet leaps through time in its metaphorical nuances, beginning with JFK’s death. The poem suggests an undertone of violence: “the butcher knife/[she] used to create hollow eyes, a jagged grin” of a pumpkin she has carved earlier, and “that summer my sister dared me/to raid Peterson’s field,” where the farmer shoots his rifle. Mischief is a part of most teenagers’ lives, though events show Kingston has never forgotten her moments, and the possibility of harm, as she remembers the “crimson” blood on Jackie Kennedy’s skirt. This trope also appears in “The Hitchhiker.” In her desire to break from monotony, she puts out a thumb, and a truck driver takes her to his cottage to avoid oncoming “tornadoes.” He tells her to look in a drawer where she finds a Colt 45. Luckily, she is unharmed.

Writing is Kingston’s forte, even from a young age. “Notes in the Margin” recalls doodling phrases in Catholic school as a priest stood over her shoulder and considered the notes to be a prayer, ironic considering they were not necessarily prayerful. “In My Father’s Voice” reveals a conversation with her worried cigar-smoking father who wants her to finish out her chemistry class in college, when she wants to “Travel. Write,” which is her type of chemistry, the word “chemistry” ironically placed as the last line of the poem, and a wonderful touch—after her father puts his cigar out.

The refuge of a Wisconsin cabin provides her a place to write. In “Write this House,” she tells herself to “Write this house/ with its clutter, its dust,/its jigsaw puzzle on the table, a piece of sky in your hand.” Kingston holds onto other pieces of the natural world, where much of her poetry comes from. As she mourns her mother’s death here, natural images arise from this landscape. In “The Dock” the speaker thinks of her mother Laura Jane: “This dock/ . . . keeps/ the cattails/opening into bruised/pods.” In “Refuge”: “Cedar smell surrounds me like an aura./When I press my ear to the log beam,/I hear the wood groan beneath its weight./I name my cabin *Laura, Laura Jane.*” The bruising and groaning images reflect the grief the speaker feels, then dangerous abandon, as she “skates over lake on winter’s fractured ice.”

The final section, “Miraculous Calligraphy of the Bones,” continues with elegies, but also includes exuberant portraits of friends and family members, depicting all in fine detail. The body and its engagement with the natural world are important to the collection. In the title poem “The Future Wears Camouflage,” she reveals how good her body feels heading to the mountains in winter to snowboard in line with the Colorado landscape surrounding her. Before she begins her sport, she encounters antelope, and feels how humans and animals both wear different kinds of camouflage, yet are connected with what pulses within their bodies:

. . . Theirs is the gold-green
of meditation, like staring
into the body’s camouflage,
deciphering the blends of red
and blue, the tiny purple
veins branching up my arm,
their roots visible at my wrist.
My thoughts too are camouflage,
splintered in faded greens
and brown.

At this instant a deer runs into her truck, and she is traumatized that it is “downed./ . . . a crumpled disaster of fur/on the highway’s shoulder.” This interrelatedness with the deer, its strong body and her own body’s capabilities, suggests nature’s power is a camouflage for how the death of beauty can happen in an instant, especially when technology interferes.

Throughout these brilliant pages, Kingston creates an homage to her loved ones, and adheres to the idea that no matter our verve for life, when loss and death occur, we are jolted into another realm where we

didn’t know, didn’t know, didn’t know
how vision could taste like saffron, smell like lilac,
or the metal sling of cathedral bell
could sound like the names of women who were loved
. . . Mariana, Beatrice, Helena, Lenore

These names belong to well-known literary figures’—Lorca’s, Poe’s, and Dante’s—honored women. However, the names also resonate back to the murdered Mexican women earlier in the book, whose lives were honored by other women embroidering their names so they will never be forgotten. Kingston will not forget, and neither will her readers. This compassionate book is about honoring women and love—woven into Kingston’s voice like “a tapestry on my tongue.”