

Thomas White

“May time bring us together”

Alyse Knorr. *Copper Mother*. Switchback Books 2016, 64 pages. \$16.00.

If not for others’ eyes, how would we view ourselves? Is identity forged by the perspective of the other, self-evaluation, or both? Alyse Knorr’s *Copper Mother* asks such universal questions, incorporating the historic Golden Record of 1977 into an allegory for the human condition. Knorr uses extraterrestrials to address human identity, time’s passage, cultural and generational communication, gender relationships, and how foreign perceptions alter self-perception.

Communication, time, and parenthood pervade the book, as one gathers from its title and opening quotations. “Greetings to our friends in the stars. May time bring us together,” reads the Golden Record’s translated Arabic greeting to life beyond Earth. An excerpt from Peter Ulmschneider follows: “...there will clearly be no chance of a two-way conversation.” Knorr weaves these themes together, portraying “Our Friends,” her alien figures, as childlike, eager to learn, and dependent on the “Copper Mother”—the Golden Record—for knowledge of cultural norms and how to fit within them.

The book is a study of how interacting with others, particularly children, may alter self-image. Knorr writes, “[Our Friends] treated us like a cavern, / beautiful because it has never been / entered, draped in cold, breathing rock / around a lake so still it is its own mirror.” Jane, an elderly woman, peers deeply into this mirror, and her life serves as a filter through which Our Friends observe humanity; they cling to her experiences like children hesitating to stray from parental worldviews. Jane, however, is but a “Copper Mother,” not connected to Our Friends as she has been to her biological children; alien to her, their eyes offer opportunities for self-discovery.

Calling them “The Cowboy” and “The Mariner,” Knorr refrains from giving Our Friends specific characteristics beyond what they have learned from their Copper Mothers. This presents a metaphor for human childhood—any might become a Cowboy or Mariner via make-believe—and allows for analysis of human culture through a lens both familiar and surreal, showcasing “the usual signs of a modern society reflecting upon itself, / lamenting all its wrongs as it commits them, at the first right / after the second turn of the century.” Our Friends are taken to locations such as Burger King, the Mall of America, the Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival, and the Grand Canyon; these places show sides of us we would prefer they see, and foster a perception of humanity as grand, majestic, beautiful, and fun.

“In Which Our Friends Play Clue” is particularly striking for its commentary on culture’s adverse effects upon children:

We lost them after “murder”—no way to explain
this fundamental concept; though they did enjoy
visiting each room of the mansion, proud
of their knowledge of human culture as they placed
candlestick in dining room, knife in kitchen, guns
in all the others, then roped the whole thing off with
the sleek plastic police tape we bought at Party City.

But it was all for the best, really, because when,
mid-way through, we realized the game's class-related
undertones and confusing suggestions about human
domestic behavior, embarrassment overtook us
and we were sure the better choice was Sorry,
or Trouble, or Life, so we checked the envelope
for the culprit, saw it was ourselves, lead pipe, library.

Knorr demonstrates how even a board game reveals—to those not desensitized—
humanity's disturbing preoccupations: killing, wealth, gender roles, and controlled knowledge, to
name a few. The poem reads like a parent suddenly realizing a beloved 1980s movie is more
graphic than memory recalled, but it is too late to cover the children's eyes; all has been exposed.
This tone is consistent throughout *Copper Mother*, as the reader develops a sense that perhaps
Our Friends are too good for us; perhaps they should have visited somewhere else, and could
have, if our Golden Record had not led them here.

Yet there is an ever-present feeling of hope throughout Knorr's book; her emotional
words tell us that by learning from self-evaluation *and* foreign perception, we have potential to
become worthy of the greater universe. "Jane knows how it formed," Knorr writes, "knows /
potential as rippled, not etched." By journey's end, Our Friends have shown that our problematic
past is part of a ripple effect leading to our ultimate potential.

Contrary to Peter Ulmschneider's epigraph, *Copper Mother*'s message is that a two-way
conversation between ourselves and our former selves, between us and Our childlike Friends, is
not only possible, but enlightening and beneficial. Alyse Knorr's sobering, sometimes disturbing,
ultimately optimistic, and deeply thought-provoking narrative launches unrecorded conversations
about the way our futures can heal our pasts, how the strange can cast new light upon the
familiar, and how time can indeed bring us together.