

Subverting Norms

By Greyson Honaker

Book Review:

In These Times the Home Is a Tired Place,
by Jessica Hollander. University of North
Texas Books, 2013.



Jessica Hollander's debut collection of stories, *In These Times the Home Is a Tired Place*, explores the traditional domains of marriage, nuclear family, gender roles, and motherhood—often exposing the destructive effects of social pressures on women. A fraught ambivalence plagues many of the characters, mostly women, about what is expected of them.

In “This Kind of Happiness,” a girlfriend discovers she’s pregnant, and her boyfriend excitedly prepares to start a family by watching sitcoms and taking notes to imitate them. Meanwhile, the girlfriend isn’t sure she wants him in her life at all:

They were, after all, in their late twenties with no reason to move further down the path of Standard Expectations. But the path was there: in the increased telephoned pleadings from parents, in the pictures of wedding-cake smiles and babies-in-beanies their co-workers posted in the office . . . they could run down the path if they wanted. The girlfriend felt like hobbling around the entrance for a while.

The girlfriend is, in the end, still hobbling, haunted by a beckoning that haunts the whole book: “Here is the path, the path said. Don’t you want me?”

Most female characters in these stories falter at a perceived crossroad, a moment in their lives when they can choose the path of social expectation or swerve their own way. These conflicts arise in biting, humorous prose—sharp, clipped sentences interrupted by sentences of surprising beauty and length: “The walk to the airport:

hurried, frigid. We loaded her into her car half-full of flimsy and filmy paper: grocery receipts and lost-pet fliers." One-liners scatter throughout each story. They show up to slap a laugh out of readers and open their eyes.

For some readers, the dialogue will be the one drawback of these nuanced, engaging stories. The dialogue is written for style, for play, for wit. It is often a quip or bizarre joke, less often a genuine word spoken from a genuine heart, or even a believable word spoken by a sincere liar. The characters' pivotal emotional reactions are usually verbal, rarely physical. We seldom see a face's reaction, or a finger's, or a leg's—the parts that tend to warp in dismay, or click nervously, or jolt in repulsion, reflecting the person's mental state. In "What Became of What She Had Made," a daughter reunites with a mother after years of distance and regret, and the daughter's reaction is natural enough. "Hello, Mother," she says, but the dialogue commences without a single description of the daughter's facial reactions or subtle body tics.

One common pitfall in books about social norms and systems is that they become polemical and seek only to condemn rather than tell a story that explores the complexities of humans in society. Hollander avoids this pitfall, allowing her characters to ponder the purpose of norms and to measure their values for themselves, rather than simply condemning those norms as evil. "She wanted to have the child," says the narrator in the title story, "wanted to raise the child to be exactly like her. . . . She wanted to hold that happiness inside, huddle around it like a big fiery secret shared only by her and the child. But there was all this interference." The character's ambivalence is honest and human, the marks of good literature.

In these stories, language is Hollander's strength. With it, she excavates the hidden implications and repercussions of social norms with a humor that enlivens and illuminates. Her scenes shine vividly and tensely.