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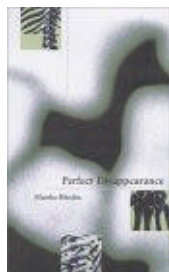
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## [Perfect Disappearance](#)

by Martha Rhodes

Kalamazoo: New Issues Press, 2000

Paperback, 62 pages, \$14.00



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Martha Rhodes embraces a wider range of poetic experience and displays a broader sense of poetry's difficult truths in her second book of poems, [Perfect Disappearance](#), than she did in her first book, [At the Gate](#), though she continues to treat topics such as sex, insanity, and pain with a system of images sometimes violently transgressive and disturbing.

Louise Gluck included Rhodes' first book in her essay "The Forbidden," reprinted in [Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry](#), before [At the Gate](#) was published. In "The Forbidden", Gluck favorably compares Rhodes' poems from the "Orbits" section of [At the Gate](#) with Linda McCarriston's explicitly confessional narrative in [Eva-Mary](#), a finalist for the National Book Award. Rhodes writes about incest, domestic violence, and suicide as honestly as McCarriston, but not directly, and not through confessional narrative. In [At the Gate](#), many poems written under the influence of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton (including "Orbits," "Dreaming of Flight," and "Song") rhyme or repeat end words and allude to fairy tales or nursery rhymes. However, Rhodes scatters her story across multiple points of view by using an assortment of pronouns.

In her second book, Rhodes no longer relies on these formal effects of confessional poetry but continues to speak through implication rather than direct statement. She oscillates between the singular and plural for nouns, poem to poem. For example, "husband" in one poem becomes "husbands" in another. Her subject matter is the same as in her first book, just a few years later: parents are now elderly, not middle aged ("Our father at 80 has moved to the country where," "One day she will fall," "This Is My Mother"). Childhood sexuality, Electra complex, and incest are less strong themes than recollections of early exploits from within a long-term relationship ("A Party," "In bed, in this," "A Thorn, A Beam"). A friend who drowned herself remains important in memory ("Destined"). Rhodes continues to ask some of the essential questions poetry poses, "What is reality?" and further, "What is the poet's place in reality?"

She asks these questions by continually disturbing a set of common images so that they become extreme. For example, "Disguised" is not a simple poem about the country in the city, or nature invading a house. In "Disguised," the narrator, disguised as a city worker, can, perhaps, be compared to serial killer John Wayne Gacy, who also disguised himself as a city employee:

They're roped up in my cellar  
All are young, all are male

All the while, Rhodes maintains her focus on dream and memory to mediate and distance experience and resulting emotion. In "The Party," a distanced "she" "learns" she prefers either anonymous or blindfolded sex before a distanced scene in which the omniscient narrator reveals that *it will be recalled* by the female character during her wedding reception, during the always-tawdry "garter toss."

The "[Perfect Disappearance](#)" of the title is the imperfect disappearance of

resolved trauma, which continues to disrupt sleep, images, and reality—decorum—in the poems. Readers are persuaded to believe in this trauma by the extremity of Rhodes' images. The title of this volume appears in a small poem, entitled, "Without Her, I," a title "interrupted" with a comma, like many in the book. This poem is linked to the previous poem but refines it: in "A Room Where a Child," the poet writes and repeats that she is dreaming or praying for a room where a child may rest in sleep. "Without Her, I" identifies the child with the narrator's search for her self.

Our belief in the reality of this trauma is heightened by signs of the narrators' own disturbance. For the first-person narrator in "How Fast," the image changes from a car/carcass in the first stanzas to a suckling pig in the last, a luau-like scene where the narrator's parents' house is on fire. The poem ends:

how do I rotate my body, how fast,  
if I reach there, where  
will I find the pit, the stake

Rhodes navigates the space between the confessional style and deep image or domestic surrealism. In "Cat," for instance, she uses the taut phrasing of the elliptical style and near-symbolism or found symbolism of the confessional style:

It would take me (*nine* months  
I realize now) nine months  
To get another

This economy allows greater play of poetic effects than confessional narrative allows. Rhodes deploys couplets ("This One Especially," "Husbands," "Oh, Luminous"), includes one-sentence poems, and occasionally indents or italicizes passages or stanzas. "For My Husband" seems to use the line break as a dash, with a much longer pause than other line breaks in her poems:

The Japanese maple  
Our house leaning into the next  
The photo of you on this wall

In the final poem, "Through Clouds, Their Whispers," the speaker is a bridge.

A bridge, fallen. And so  
they call me. *Lie across our river*, they beg

The river could be Lethe, the river of forgetfulness; the speaker, a liar. "They" "call" or name her a bridge and ask her to be one. This poem follows "Two Ghosts," where the protagonist negotiates between the living and the dead by imaginatively jumping from a bridge.

Rhodes' allusiveness is grounded in the psychological symbolism of deep-image poetry rather than the intertextuality of postmodernism. She uses dreams, dreams of ghosts, and dreamlike symbols: a house, the wind, and a bridge between the living and the dead, dream and reality, memory and imagination. These symbols represent the poet, and the poet's relationship to experience. Rhodes writes about her experience, but even as she uses disruptive and transgressive images, she does not rhetorically dramatize her experience. Instead, where what she represents is her self, she foregrounds the notion that representation does violence to what is represented.

Martha Rhodes is director of [Four Way Books](#) and of the Civic Center Synagogue reading series. She teaches at Emerson College and New School

University, and in 2001 at the University of California (Irvine). *Perfect Disappearance* won the 2000 New Issues Press Green Rose Prize for a second-or-subsequent volume of poetry.

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**DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY**

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Gluck, Louise, [Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry](#). Ecco Press, 1994.

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