Carrie Etter’s third collection, *Imagined Sons*, is an astonishing, intimate, and searing set of poems. And much like its subject, once in these poems, there’s no getting out.

This collection makes no mystery of its origin, outlined in the opening poem:

**A Birthmother’s Catechism**

*How did you let him go?*

With black ink and legalese

*How did you let him go?*

It’d be another year before I could vote

*How did you let him go?*

With altruism, tears and self-loathing

*How did you let him go?*

A nurse brought pills for drying up breast milk

*How did you let him go?*

Who hangs a birdhouse from a sapling?

Etter was an unwed mother at 17; the son in the title is hers. The first of many ways in which this collection succeeds is by not sugar-coating or catastrophising. Instead, what we have here is the result of long, slow burn – and what we have too are both ashes and embers.

Etter’s skill with narrative development is clear from the organization of the collection; we discover by the second catechism the awful but important coincidence that her son’s birthday is September 11. Rather than taking emotional and symbolic centre stage however, this resonating, unsolvable and amorphous grief becomes a presence, at times intensifying something already nearly unbearable:

*What is the anniversary of loss?*

A national day of mourning

…

And at times almost incidental:

*Really now, what is the anniversary of loss?*

My mother and I watch TV well past her usual bedtime

…

Each Birthmother Catechism asks the same chosen question over and over, and each answer – sometimes surreal, sometimes funny, sometimes random, playful, obscured, often finely distilled – is found to be wanting. Why, we wonder, ask the same question? Why no progress here, no movement? In the opposite manner to Hughes’ ‘Examination at the Womb-Door’(*Crow*), which offers the same answer (‘Death’) to every question, Etter asks the same *questions* over and over – and offers answers which lead every which way, and to multiple variations. In one sweep typical of the nuance of this collection, Etter’s technique captures how we approach problems both as children and as adults: we ask the same question until we receive an answer we can live with, or believe. Unlike religious and most secular catechisms, however, Etter’s catechisms don’t lead to understanding or knowledge. They aren’t guidelines at all. Instead, they become cries, or interrogating voices, to which there are no satisfactory, only partial, replies.

If the 10 regularly occurring catechisms are the boned stays -- the steely rods – of unwed motherhood, of adoption, of grief and loss – the 38 interleaved prose poems here, numbered ‘Imagined Sons’, represent the organic, the unstoppable – as well as limitless, confusing possibility. Each prose poem imagines a son, an encounter, and sees this scene to its sometimes perplexing, sometimes tender, sometimes scathing conclusion. From the son’s projected loss in ‘Imagined Sons 3: Seed Corn’ “… Only as he approaches the field’s edge, nearing the house, does he begin to suspect a human presence, once lost and now, possibly, retrievable…” to the ‘I’s’ feelings of rejection “…It’s just as I expected: he has no more time for me than anyone else.” (‘Imagined Sons 14: Five Star’), to the poems which imagine her son’s occupations and vocations (a baker, a woodcutter, beggar, surfer, businessman), Etter uses these prose poems’ narrative glimpses as parts of whole stories which can never be written, and their poetic resonances – as ever – to capture the unspoken and unreachable, as in ‘Imagined Sons 27: The Fourth Supermarket Dream’ –

‘It’s *your* birthday,’ I say. ‘What do *you* want for dinner?’

He grins. ‘How about ribs?’

I swing the cart toward the meat coolers, and he keeps pace at my side.

The items in the cart rise: barbecue sauce, sour cream, an angel food cake, potatoes, two cobs of corn, chives, salted butter, a box of candles, white frosting, a six-pack of Negra Modelo…

Who knows if we will ever leave?

Many of these prose poems have a distinctive ‘oral’ quality to them – whether via dialogue or colloquial speech, or through the extraordinary precision Etter shows in using ‘real world’ locations, foods, clothes, music etc. At the same time and inevitably too with prose poetry, Etter must negotiate prose and poetry rhythms and pacings simultaneously. At first reading then, some particularly narrative writing, or the use of adverbs, can be jarring, as in ‘Imagined Sons 28: The Pilot’ -

At my row he halts and asks with a smile…

I glance about, noting quizzical looks…

His grin broadens. ‘That would be worrying wouldn’t it? Your life in someone else’s hands, someone not really grown up yet, you not able to do anything about it…’

Softly I respond, ‘You’re not the pilot. You’re too young to be the pilot.’

This is uncomfortable reading. It’s slightly awkward. It explains. It tries – too hard? And yet: such exposition and artifice, such self-consciousness, is unavoidable. In fact, it’s necessary. Because so much here is being ‘tried on’ for size, for feelings, for the imagined outcomes. It cannot be real, ever – and of course, that’s the aching point.

Etter’s fundamental gift throughout *Imagined Sons* is her deft handling of tone; throughout, she employs the no-nonsense, matter-of-fact darkness that so often permeates bad dreams and their anxious attempts at normality. We try to pretend that we understand these dreams, and that everything is okay – but we know of course we don’t, and that it’s not. We know instead that something is happening we can’t change, and don’t understand at all. In these prose poem worlds, the ‘I’ is frequently on the outside looking in, looking for a key to enter, for permission, and for conversation, for recognition, acknowledgement, and a sort of explanation. It is a testament to the poet’s delicacy, restraint and invention that as readers we don’t run straight away from what, when stripped down, is so painful. Far from setting these wonderings firmly out of our experience, Etter’s writing compels and moves us: we too imagine the sons, and find there the immutable and worthwhile fact of being alive.

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