



Jun 11 The Trauma of Girlhood and Womanhood: A Review of Elizabeth Hazen's *Girls Like Us*

Nandini Bhattacharya ([/?author=5ee0fdbef0622805071b3c2c](https://www.thelitpub.com/?author=5ee0fdbef0622805071b3c2c))

If the legacy of a timeless *cri-de-coeur* out of the depths by women writers has seemed to become redundant in the last twenty-odd years of post-feminism, then Elizabeth Hazen's poetry collection titled *Girls Like Us* (<https://bookshop.org/a/162/9781942892229>) is the aesthetic equivalent of pushing the finger back into the unhealed wound: the trauma of girlhood and womanhood in this society as in most others. Her poetry brings up into view what is so often swept under the carpet: a dystopic world still uniquely a part of



women's experience because of gender ideologies hardly as moribund as many young women today would like to believe. This is poetry in its best form: ineffable interrogator, ethicist and chronicler of human history.

Hazen, whose first book *Chaos Theories* (<https://bookshop.org/a/162/9781942892021>) was also published by Alan Squire Press in 2016, explores the clot of sexual trauma often connected to the wounds of addiction and mental health issues in young women and girls. In *Girls Like Us* (<https://bookshop.org/a/162/9781942892229>) Hazen doesn't 'unflinchingly' approach these topics. She very much flinches, as a poet with an experiential dimension to her writing might or will. The pain is there on the surface ; the pain is in black and white ; the pain refuses to be swept under the carpet.

No one would doubt that Hazen came of age when women were re-launching (as women's movements need to do again and again, there being no rest for the weary) the third wave of feminism in the face of the budding backlash that since then has become a slashing of women's rights and freedoms. As testament to the timeliness and resonance of what she has to say, her poetry has appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *American Literary Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Southwest Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Normal School* and other journals. In *girls like us*, the "self" exposed by a language apparently almost bleached of vibrancy swiftly establishes itself as the opposite of "singular."

Hazen writes in "Why I Love Zombie Women": "because her need/ is clear, uncomplicated. . . because she doesn't stop/ even after the hatchet hacks clean through/ her reaching arm; because she will pursue/ her prey till they have nothing left to chop/ Because when she lies in pieces, inside out/ she will not know regret, or shame, or doubt". And this, to compound the fun, is composed as a classic sonnet. Refreshing as Hazen's wry and rueful engagement with rhymed verse always is, the hardihood she displays in this collection running words around the ring of their own formal antecedents and prohibitions — sonnets are about consuming love, aren't they? — allows her to hold up the monstrous mirror in which patriarchal representations of femininity can see themselves refracted as who they are.

Still, in the slippage and space between real and representational, Hazen hangs out miracles and wonders like the Himatsu-Bako box whose "emptiness becomes its promise, vast as a blank page". Also, perhaps the felicitous alignment of her insights with her expressions is rather like the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets who astonished the old world with unimagined similitudes and verisimilitudes plucked out of an unfolding natural world and Natural Philosophy aka Science. Thus, Hazen writes in "Alignment": "Planets align from time to time, and much/ is made of the effects such cosmic chance/ could have on Earth, though in fact/. . . such coincidence can't touch/ the craft of carpenters with their dovetail joints/. . . /And what of the body? . . . the problem is my lust's incongruity with logic. . . / I want to rearrange my heart, to alter/the facts, selectively recall — I falter/ fall out of line, think only of his face". While Hazen's words do recall sexual trauma familiar to many 'girls' living under the 'Law of the Father,' it is this very incandescent precision of her language that allows Hazen to fashion with compassionate irony co-dependent worlds of desire and despair: "The moon's pull is nothing compared to the weight/ of my body sinking into his bed again/ The acceleration of a falling object/ occurs at a constant rate, and repetition/ changes nothing unless conditions change".



Arrangement of poems is an important thing in this volume; whereas sometimes the poems of Part 1 feel flatly accusatory — note how different is “Blackout is for girls like us/who can be rearranged” from the later poetry cited above — those later poems in Part 2 feel like meat on the bones of the longing to be whole and to heal, living outdoing the bruises of death and love, love of death, and death of love. In the 2nd Part the raw anguish of the hungover fall from grace in “Decisive. Indecisive. *He* decided” gives way to a wiry wisdom that finally sees that “We’ve been called so many things that we are not/ we startle at the sound of our own names”. Finally, lines of verse step out and push one hard in the chest, obliging exclamation, pause, reckoning, refamiliarization, resumption. Readers of Elizabeth Hazen can expect long years of magic as well as precision-tool craft with words.

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Nandini Bhattacharya was born and raised in India and has called the United States her second continent for the last thirty years. Wherever she has lived, she has generally turned to books for answers to life’s big questions. Her short stories have been published in *The Bacon Review*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Ozone Park Journal*, *Storyscape Journal*, *Raising Mothers*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, and *Oyedrum*. She has attended the Bread Loaf Writers’ Workshop and held residencies at the Vermont Studio Center, VONA, and the Craigardan Writers Residency (forthcoming). She was first runner-up for the *Los Angeles Review* Flash Fiction contest (2017-2018), a finalist for the *Fourth River Folio* Contest for Prose Prize (2018), long-listed for the Disquiet International Literary Prize (2019 and 2020), and a finalist for the Reynolds-Price International Women’s Literary

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