



*Paying for Gas with Quarters:
A Parent's Odyssey in
Poems*, Aly Allen, 2023.
Middle West Press

ROGER THOMPSON

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ABSTRACT

A review of the poetry collection *Paying for Gas with Quarters: A Parent's Odyssey in Poems* by Amy Allen. Middle West Press, 2023.

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Midway through *Paying for Gas with Quarters: A Parent's Odyssey in Poems*, Aly Allen (2023) writes what might be some of the most emblematic words ever to be penned to describe Operation Enduring Freedom: "Afghanistan stinks because of what we bring / & burn" (p. 40, lines 24–25). The lines come in the poem "Guard Tower" (pp. 39–41), and they illustrate one of the great strengths of Allen's poetry—the ability to consolidate profound nuance into brief, even pithy, sentences. Similar lines emerge throughout the collection, serving as orienting stars across a constellation of work that challenge form and structure. They mark core themes, recurrent images, and sounds, and, perhaps more importantly, they ground readers, providing places where they can position themselves within the collection more broadly.

Allen writes from wartime service experience, and while several poems (primarily in the first part of the collection) are explicit about war and the military, and while the legacies of combat and loss linger like ghosts in others, the collection might best be described as an extended rumination on domesticity and identity wherein war and veteran identity serve as a backdrop that, while formative, is nonetheless often secondary, if not explicitly set aside to explore other identities and ways of being. The collection dwells in home and home-ness (conceived broadly), and though it breaches outward, the domestic is central in driving the collection forward.

This may be a result of the poet's biography, which suggests something of the complex interweaving of home life, military life, and shifting conceptions of self. Allen is a US Army veteran who served in Afghanistan with the 10th Mountain Division. Self-identifying as a neurodivergent parent, trans writer, and military veteran, she received an MFA in writing from Oklahoma State University, where she has taught writing and founded the Military Memoirs Writing Workshop. These various markers of self emerge throughout her poetry, and readers discover these domains intermixed and explored, and, in some very tangible ways, tested within her work. For example, Allen repeatedly invokes tinnitus, returning to it time and again as a legacy of her war, but also as touchstone for exploring a sense of self. Six different poems across different sections of the collection are all titled "Tinnitus," and each one opens entirely new territory—not just in subject matter, but in form as well. The repetition of the title serves to remind us of what has come before, but none require the others to live fully on the page. The previous explorations of the tinnitus enrich subsequent ones, but they are not necessary to have a full experience of the sounds and message Allen wants us to hear against a ringing backdrop. The repeating titles are unifying, not exclusive or excluding.

They might also be considered reconstructions—of shattered past lives, of fragmented senses of self and families. Indeed, Allen's poems seem self-consciously occupied with reconstruction of various identities with an eye toward making sense of them, not as individual pieces being scrutinized, but as various parts of a whole. That whole shifts and changes over time, and Allen's poems cobble them together to form a clear path forward for the writer, the reader, and families that endure transformational change and trauma.

The third section of the collection, *Olympus*, is especially poignant, as it wanders not through war, but through family, motherhood, and parenting. The section begins with a set of poems exploring a history of church and religious life, and they excavate histories of trauma that the poet's system of faith at some point rejected and silenced. In "Evangelical Choir Director," Allen ruminates on the impact of her faith system's silencing of dissent and doubt. Allen writes that "When I tell her, I don't / want my children to suffer / the same abuse of indoctrination, / she stares at the devil I must be" (p. 49, lines 16–20). The lines illustrate the fracturing of her faith, and they do so in the context of parenting. These are not simply reflections of herself as poet, but instead are reflections on herself as mother attempting to make change. That change threatens the stability of her past and the certainty of its traditions, but it also liberates, even if the liberation is labeled as something from the "devil." And even if that liberation is terrifyingly vast.

At the end of a poem in the same section, "I Miney-Mooed Every Major Decision," Allen drives this point home. Insisting that "We must always remain / in the midst" (p. 54, lines 8–9), she turns to the true terror that comes from living in that middle zone where future and past collide, but also expand infinitely in both directions forward and back. She writes that she had "Never made it out onto or into / the ocean. It's not the sharks, / it's the vastness, the endless liminal / swaying, the pitch, the fear of turning / around and suddenly seeing" (p. 54, lines 16–20). Here the vastness is frightening, but the possibility that the vastness illuminates something new to be seen or experienced is the root of fear. It's the thing that makes bobbing in the sea so terrifying.

Given Allen's preoccupation with how the past and future make contact in swaying, liminal spaces, her repeated use of classical mythology throughout the collection makes for especially important touchstones. Allen insists in an afterward "Artist Statement" that she seeks to "avoid that mythological reunion" embodied by Valhalla in Norse mythology (p. 84). Yet, Greek mythology animates many of Allen's poems to connect past and future, war and home. This connection is no reunion, as

promised in her statement, but is instead a repurposing of story to reimagine the future. Allen invokes Sisyphus, Thetis, the underworld, Achilles, Zeus, the *Illiad*, and more, even titling one section of the collection Olympus. These recollections of myth recur throughout the collection, and they repeatedly serve to connect a distant, even graphically violent past, with a future that renames and rethinks the meaning of those events.

“Plead for Me Thetis” (p. 29) illustrates the point well: “Grant her, Shapeshifter, / the power to reassign the apple, / may she only pass her anger onto her enemies” (lines 25–27). The verb “reassign” here is striking, as it doesn’t reduce or eliminate the object of the sentence, “apple,” but instead preserves in order to change it into something whose difficult emotions are preserved only for a future, unnamed enemy. Recalling an earlier poem, “Battle Buddy” (p. 12) where she similarly links mythological image and anger—indeed in the earlier poem, she connects that image to “rage”—she invokes myth to re-tell her story and the stories that have made up her life, crafting meaning from them despite the pain.

Allen’s experimentation with form throughout the collection might be read in similar ways. She breaks apart structure in order to, as she says in “Sometimes a Poem” (p. 76), untangle the rope— / untether the dock— / unlock the watch— / sail into storms, / prepare to float / upon shattered bits / of ship” (lines 13–19) Those shattered bits, cobbled together, are her conveyance into the broad

seas she imagines, and whether fear has limited her in the past, the poems leave no doubt that she has found a way forward. She has seen the vastness her poet identity feared, and with clear eyes and poignant words, she gives us a glimpse into what it may mean to undertake the same journey.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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