

# Mira Rosenthal

## The Local World

By Callista Buchen

In the current poetic landscape, with all its marvelous experimentations and risks, with all its formal permutations, strange and invigorating as they are, figuring out what makes a poem and what makes a poem matter can be daunting tasks for readers and writers. Yet, such questions, in all their unanswerable, indeterminate glory, continue to remain necessary, essential even, something that brings us to the page. Even though I appreciate so much of the poetry I've been reading lately, it is rare that a new collection of poems leads me back to these important questions, to consider and reconsider the state and purpose of the poem—and in this case, to understand the potential inherent in poetry, to understand what a poet can really do.

In the final essay of *Nine Gates*, the poet Jane Hirshfield argues that the task of the writer is to become “a person on whom nothing is lost.” Mira Rosenthal, author of *The Local World*, winner of the 2010 Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize, selected by Maggie Anderson, is that kind of writer. *The Local World* is more than exercise, more than experiment, more than tradition, more, even, than language or form. As much as it highlights them, it also renders questions of the nature of poetry irrelevant, or at least secondary in the act of reading this collection. Something greater is at stake. Here, Rosenthal finds the intersection of life, suffering, transcendence, and poetry, arranging, as Hirshfield puts it, “words to illumine more widely our passage through the dark woods and brightly lit cities of the fleeting, time-bound world.”

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Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2010.

Written in three numbered and titled sections, much of *The Local World* is concerned with memory and experience, and with unraveling the meaning located in and through the geography of remembering. Rosenthal explores experience as embodied, as written on the landscape of the body or in the land itself. This is especially clear in the first section, “Salvage and Tarweed,” introduced with lines from Ellen Bryant Voigt: “Digging a hole to where the past is buried, / one covers the living grass on the other side.” Here, the speaker’s relationship with her sister and the sister’s painful medical procedures, including skin grafting, dominate the section’s emotional register. In one of the most powerful poems of the collection, “Curtain,” the kind of poem that leaves me breathless and quiet, the speaker recalls waiting “down the hall” at the hospital while her sister endured painful dressing changes:

I felt  
the same crease of cool air slicing her  
in half, turning over onto her stomach,  
the thin gown sliding open in back,  
the spine, the cleaving calves, we are  
two halves

Later, the speaker tries to reconcile meaning in the physical suffering, to read the process as marked on the body of the sister:

And I [. . .] tried to find some sort  
of rhythm in it all, some sort of pattern,  
the way her skin would later be, meshed  
by making lengthwise nicks in succession  
stippled like the pincushion of a seamstress  
who kept her needles meticulous in rows  
down and across in the cushion’s flesh.  
And all of this to be torn apart.

In poems like “Curtain,” Rosenthal captures the helpless isolation of witnessing pain, of reading, empathizing, and imagining the suffering written on another’s body. It is the distance between bodies that simultaneously separates and joins the speaker and her sister, and by extension, us.

Rosenthal considers the role of language in experience and memory, as well as in the construction of narratives, both for the individual and in terms of what it means to be human. According to Rosenthal, several poems in the *The Local World* “are based on or refer to photographs from Dorothea Lange’s series *Death of*

*a Valley.*” In such pieces, Rosenthal crosses land, body, and representation, making language the medium for insight, transcendence, and renewal.

For instance, in “Photograph: Westward,” the reader, through the speaker, observes a photograph of the human-sanctioned devastation of the California Berryessa Valley, the defenselessness of the land “could be a scene from Anasazi ruins.” The speaker reads closely: “the flooding will commence in three weeks’ time, the caption says.” Alongside the speaker’s consideration of the photograph, of “the fertile valley now forgone to reservoir,” italicized moments rendering skin grafting are included. Beyond punctuation, such moments operate on a plane without the artificial constraints of conventional grammar. In other words, they will not be organized. “*they took her tissue living tissue pressed it over the wound like a wet petal*” says the speaker, allowing the devastation of the land and the body, of the many and the individual, to spill into one another with the syntax between the photograph and skin grafting left open. There, in the gap, is where the reader finds the poem.

The final poem of “Salvage and Tarweed,” like so much of the book, is thoughtfully arranged. It organically prepares the reader for “Necessary Travel,” the second section of *The Local World*, with lines like “I know a little what it’s like to a leave / a place.” Extending the conversation of land and body, “Necessary Travel” interrogates selfhood and boundaries. Locating the self in place, Rosenthal breaks down boundaries of inner and outer worlds, exploring what it means to be “foreign.” In the longest poem of the collection, “Foreign in a Foreign Country,” movement, between places, between selves, and a sense of the unsettled seem to drive the poet-speaker. In part 2 of “Foreign in a Foreign Country,” “Room, Anywhere,” the correlation between place and self becomes central:

one body and soul set in this, not that other  
place you fear to name or you will cave  
in to nostalgia, capitulate to the person  
you used to be, but now you can be anyone,  
start from being foreign in a foreign country.

Later, in “Mysticism in the Dark,” the final section of *The Local World*, the speaker moves through the experiences of the past, renders them toward a new kind of light, a kind of peace and understanding and future. Here, the poet seems to “give it back.” The whole book, it seems, is this kind of giving back. Rosenthal transforms memory and experience into a new geography, making a world of poems

that will resonate with the reader as local and immediate. Yet Rosenthal also crafts these maps with a timeless sensibility, with the poem as object, as artifact, as its own site of meaning. The world we find in Rosenthal's first collection is an illuminated landscape of process, one that makes clear why we need poems to brave the darkness.