

Review by Anne Colwell

"The Simplest Question" – A Review

QUESTIONS FROM OUTER SPACE

By Diane Thiel

©2022, Red Hen Press, 104 pages, ISBN 978-1-63628-027-1

DIANE THIEL'S WORK has always asked fundamental and human questions. Janet Holmes, reviewing Thiel's first book, *Echolocations*, notes that Thiel's work deals with "silences, evasions, loss, and omissions." This third poetry book, *Questions from Outer Space*, still revolves around the unseen and silent, but differently—with a larger lens, an even greater range of form and voice, and a mature grace. I first met Thiel's work through the poems in *Echolocations*, and the writers and readers in my classroom have responded strongly to poems like "The Minefield" and "Memento Mori in Middle School." While this first book focuses on personal loss, her second book, *Resistance Fantasies*, asks questions about cultural and mythological power and its uses and abuses, asks what our individual silence in the face of power allows. In the title poem, she asks that we examine our own assumption that we would have resisted the Nazis, would have sympathized with enslaved people and Native Americans, would have given our food and families to oppose cultural oppression, had we been the ones living in another historical moment. She notes at the end of the poem, "We were all / the heroes in someone else's war."

Questions from Outer Space continues Thiel's discussion of and engagement with our human perspective and its limits, her fascination with the questions that we ask and the ones we fail to ask. This book begins with a section called "Questions of Time and Direction" that locates the reader (or, maybe more aptly,

BOOK REVIEWS

dislocates the reader) in the shifting and interacting worlds of time and space. Whether it's the way our body renews itself cell by cell until we are new in "Just Before Dawn" or the children in the ekphrastic poem "Measure by Time" who "fit themselves inside / the toy that fits inside a pocket," Thiel focuses on the central puzzle of human change, growth and decay, adaptation.

One of the many things that is most admirable about the opening two sections, "Questions of Time and Direction" and "Notice from Another Dimension," is Thiel's willingness to inhabit the voice of the complete outsider. For example, in "Remotely," Thiel interrogates and critiques the American culture of the remote—remote learning, remote child-rearing, remote connection—like an anthropologist studying a people whose ways baffle and affront her. In the title poem, "The Factory (Questions from Outer Space)" the speaker seems to be an alien reporting back to another world about the strangeness of ours. The perspective might remind you of Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth* or sci-fi fiction that seeks to shift the lens to help us see ourselves more clearly. The only hope the speaker offers for contemporary humans tethered to computers who have voluntarily traded away free minds for a factory of instant gratification is this:

*every now and then I notice
someone walks out of the factory,
battered, scarred, but still standing
and looks up at the stars
with a surprising question,
trying to find a different answer.*

In his review of *Resistance Fantasies*, X. J. Kennedy noted that "Diane Thiel is as much at home in rhymed, metrical verse as in freer forms, some of these latter entirely original." This quality carries into *Questions from Outer Space*; here Thiel's use of form displays a kind of lovely sprezzatura. Thiel's use of form has a joyful, graceful quality that always connects with the

meaning of the work. Whether in poems that announce their forms, like “Pantoum on a Paper Moon” or “Tritina in the Time of the Machine,” or in poems that sneak the form into the mix, like “Recovering the Lost,” which is a kind of loose villanelle that reminds me of Elizabeth Bishop, Thiel never uses form extraneously but instead relies on form to strengthen and support the themes and images of the poems.

What makes this book truly successful—and beautiful—is that the last two sections, “The Farthest Side” and “Time in the Wilderness,” though they seem to move away from the “Outer Space” and alien of the earlier sections, actually move deeper into it and suggest that the most alien, the most “other,” is the most ordinary. Parenting children, relating to our parents, the small moments of our everyday lives open the door to the extraordinary, the “extraterrestrial,” and the amazing. In “Library of Veria, Greece,” Thiel writes about the drawings of the children of Syrian refugees who are “mapping” unimaginable new lives. As a child of wartime refugees herself, Thiel says, “I have so much to say / and so much not to.” In “Living with Aliens,” Thiel explores the idea—wry and funny and unsettling—that our children are the ultimate body snatchers, the aliens who hijack our lives and then inherit our world. Everyday life takes center stage in the end. From poems like “High Noon at the Remote Corral,” a sketch of Thiel’s family teaching and working at home in the pandemic, to the wonderful series of epigrams called “Short Subjects with Long Titles” that find poems in her children’s wise and “alien” perspectives on the world, the end of this book challenges the reader to both celebrate and redefine our perspective as we look at the beauty and strangeness of the changing and changeable world. At the end of the book, we return to the unanswerable question, the only one worth asking, and, as Thiel says in the last line of the last poem, it is “the simplest question / opening the world again.”

