



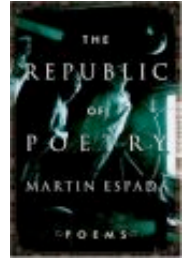
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Publisher: [Eric Olsen](#)

REVIEW

Book Review: Aracelis Girmay's *Teeth*

Written by [Lisa Alvarado](#)
Published August 07, 2007



Aracelis Girmay writes poetry, fiction, & essays. *Teeth*, her collection of poems, was published by Curbstone Press in June 2007. Her poetry has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Callaloo*, & *MiPoesias*, among other journals. Her collage-based picture book, *changing, changing*, was published by George Braziller in 2005. Girmay is a Cave Canem Fellow & former Watson Fellow. She teaches writing workshops in New York & California.

(That's the official bio, gente, but I think you'll love hearing Aracelis on Aracelis in a recent email I received.)

"I've loved books & the idea of reading since I was little. The story goes "you used to memorize the books & sit & read from memory before you knew how to really read." I used to sleep with my books. I LOVED to read, and then, I used to tell my younger brother stories. My grandmother still has folders of stories I'd write at her house. When I was 13, though, I read *The Bluest Eye*, I remember thinking: Oh, god, we're allowed to write like that? The way we think? The way people talk? The ways my people talk? Oh, really?

It opened up this door of permission — I didn't know, really, that writing could represent me, not until then. wow, something in the way that I perceived writing & reading changed in me then.

I started sharing my work with other people when I was in college — Writing has always been my lifeline — my way of figuring & making sense & asking questions & maintaining hope, a hope. But it wasn't until college that I realized that I HAD to cultivate this work — that I HAVE to write. It is one of my absolute necessities. Circulation, breath, communication, memory, wildness, & order.

My mom is Puerto Rican & African American (Georgian) — from Chicago, & my dad's Eritrean, born in Gondar, Ethiopia. Both of them are amazing story-tellers — who tell the stories in very different ways. But, oh! The stories — they are essential — I always had the sense (even when I was very small) that these stories would be the only landscapes in which I'd meet, say, my Great Aunt Tiny, my uncle Samuel, my grandparents, my countries. I knew, too, that the stories were not only important for me & my brother to hear (my sisters weren't born yet), but for my parents to say out loud.

I remember witnessing the powers a story can have on the person telling — the way connections that weren't

made before can be made in the telling. I write because it is my way of speaking, my way of figuring, my way of connecting, moving deeper into my life. I write, too, in the words of Carolyn Forché: against forgetting. I write the things that others wish I would forget. The things I cannot bear forgetting. The things I cannot survive forgetting. I write to get something back: world, that is, to still myself, somehow, & consider the things the world is constantly showing: see, see this! hear, hear this! say this! remember, remember! I write to undo time, to go back & fiddle, to sit with what I've been given, to learn something, really, to visit the ghosts & let them know I see them.

Influences — poets, fictionists, painters, musicians:

Helene Cixous, Aime Cesaire, Audre Lorde, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison, Frida Kahlo, Martín Espada, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nazim Hikmet, Anna Akhmatova, Ovid, Etta James, Derek Walcott, Naomi Shihab Nye, Cy Twombly, Lucille Clifton, Caetano Veloso, Pharoah Sanders, Taha Muhammad Ali, James Tate, my students, a few of Hayden Carruth's poems knock me out--hugely, church stories, my family's stories, my parents, my family's dead; and every accordion: every accordion is my influence."

And if you haven't already fallen in love with her and her writing, take a look at what others have to say about the Divine Ms. Girmay.

"In *Teeth*, the poems of Aracelis Girmay ring out with a burning truth as she transports the reader into the world of despair, discrimination, sorrows, triumphs, joy and the courage it takes to flourish as a woman of color. Her keen observations are put forth with an appetite for life without fear or self-consciousness as she weaves her words into a range of potent poems." — Nicholasa Mohr

"The poetry of Aracelis Girmay is so strong, so brave, so lyrical, so fiery, so joyful, that the usual superlatives fail. I think of Sandra Cisneros and her words of praise for another writer, Denise Chávez: 'I love this book so much, it sounds like I'm lying.' Exactly." — Martín Espada

"In the foreword, [Espada] calls the poems, 'hard, cutting, brilliant, beautiful.' As I read *Teeth*, I have to say that it did not take long for me to agree with [his] opinion. But more than that, I have to say that Girmay has put together one of the best debuts by any poet in recent memory...This collection is sure to continue to create a significant amount of well-deserved buzz. No doubt it will garner more praise and will be mentioned among nominees for literary awards. Indeed, Aracelis Girmay is the real deal." -- Jose B. Gonzalez, Co-Editor of *Latino Boom*

"In her powerful debut collection of poems, *Teeth*, Aracelis Girmay reaches out to her various cultural lineages (Eritrean, Puerto Rican and African American) and weaves them into a distinct voice, political and beautiful as 'bullets of ivory'...*Teeth* delivers on its promise to be a fierce, proud book of poems that provokes thought and invites its readers to be a poet's unique and expectant universe, where celebration and protest, lament and solace, sound and silence, intertwine and thrive." -- *El Paso Times*

Aracelis Girmay makes me want to be a better writer. *TEETH* is a stunning piece of work de sudor y socorro. She has the gift — able to craft indelible work fashioned from the bones of ancestors and living, singing blood. Girmay has been blessed to be mentored by Martín Espada but make no mistake, her voice is wholly and fully her own, as is her subject matter. Her mastery of poetic form and an almost ruthless, heartbreaking beauty is shot through this unforgettable volume. And like Espada, she seamlessly fuses the personal and political, revealing where the wounds lie. But Girmay always, always, returns to the indomitable, unquenchable spirit that saves even the most disadvantaged, the most abused from being mere victims. She is also brave enough, wise

enough to show her heart in love and at play.

But the social power of this book is never diluted. At its essence, *TEETH* reminds me of a passage in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. A young woman, a peasant girl, has completed her training to become a soldier, the means by which her family and her village will seek justice against the overlord. With a whisper-thin blade, her parents inscribe the history of abuse which all of them have suffered. The girl's back becomes her eternal oath, a record laid into the flesh, but it is never reduced to a scar.

ARROZ POETICA

I got news yesterday
from a friend of mine
that all people against the war should
send a bag of rice to George Bush,
& on the bag we should write,
"If your enemies are hungry, feed them."

But to be perfectly clear,
my enemies are not hungry.
They are not standing in lines
for food, or stretching rations,
or waiting at the airports
to claim the pieces
of the bodies of their dead.
My enemies ride jets to parties.
They are not tied up in pens
in Guantanamo Bay. They are not
young children throwing rocks. My enemies eat
meats & vegetables at tables
in white houses where candles blaze, cast
shadows of crosses, & flowers.
They wear ball gowns & suits & rings
to talk of war in neat & folded languages
that will not stain their formal dinner clothes
or tousle their hair. They use words like "casualties"
to speak of murder. They are not stripped down to skin
& made to stand barefoot in the cold or hot.
They do not lose their children to this war.
They do not lose their houses & their streets. They do not
come home to find their lamps broken.
They do not ever come home to find their families murdered
or disappeared or guns put at their faces.
Their children are not made to walk
a field of mines, exploding.

This is no wedding.
This is no feast.
I will not send George Bush rice, worked for rice
from my own kitchen

where it sits in a glass jar & I am transfixed
by the thousands of beautiful pieces
like a watcher at some homemade & dry
aquarium of grains, while the radio calls out
the local names of 2,000
US soldiers counted dead since March.
&, we all know it, there will always be more than
what's been counted. They will not say the names
of an Iraqi family trying to pass a checkpoint
in an old white van. A teenager caught out on some road
after curfew. The radio will go on, shouting
the names &, I promise you,
they will not call your name, Hassna
Ali Sabah, age 30, killed by a missile in Al-Bassra, or you,
Ibrahim Al-Yussuf, or the sons of Sa'id Shahish
on a farm outside of Baghdad, or Ibrahim, age 12,
as if your blood were any less red, as if the skins
that melted were any less skin, & the bones
that broke were any less bone,
as if your eradication were any less absolute, any less
eradication from this earth where you were
not a president or a military soldier.
& you will not ever walk home
again, or smell your mother's hair again,
or shake the date palm tree
or smell the sea
or hear the people singing at your wedding
or become old
or dream or breathe, or even pray or whistle,
& your tongue will be all gone or useless
& it will not ever say again or ask a question,
you, who were birthed once, & given milk,
& given names that mean: she is born at night,
happy, favorite daughter,
morning, heart, father of
a multitude.

Your name, I will have noticed
on a list collected by an Iraqi census of the dead,
because your name is the name of my own brother,
because your name is the Tigrinya word for "tomorrow,"
because all my life I have wanted a farm,
because my students are 12, because I remember
when my sisters were 12. & I will not
have ever seen your eyes, & you will not
have ever seen my eyes
or the eyes of the ones who dropped the missiles,

or the eyes of the ones who ordered the missiles,
 & the missiles have no eyes. You had no chance,
 the way they fell on avenues & farms
 & clocks & schoolchildren. There was no place for you
 & so you burned. A bag of rice will not bring you back.
 A poem cannot bring you. & although it is my promise here
 to try to open every one of my windows, I cannot
 imagine the intimacy with which
 a life leaves its body, even then,
 in detonation, when the skull is burst,
 & the body's country of indivisible organs
 flames into the everything. & even in
 that quick departure as the life rushes on,
 headlong or backwards, there must, must
 be some singing as the hand waves "be well"
 to its other hand, goodbye;
 & the ear belongs to the field now.
 & we cannot separate the roof from the heart
 from the trees that were there, standing.
 & so it is, when I say "night,"
 it is your name I am calling,
 when I say "field,"
 your thousand, thousand names,
 your million names.

IN THE CANE FIELDS

You are a steel-blade woman,
 I am a steel-blade man.
 When we dance like this,
 head-high in the cane,
 my heart beats red with want.

It's a dangerous taste
 gonna swing me from some hanging tree.

I am a steel-blade woman.
 You are a steel-blade man.

If the Boss Men follow
 down the dirt red road,
 accuse us of blackness & of love,
 let us live again, sweet,
 come back & haunt these fields.

FOR ESTEFANI LORA, THIRD GRADE, WHO MADE ME A CARD
 for Estefani Lora, PS 132, Washington Heights

*

Elephant on an orange line, underneath a yellow circle meaning sun.
6 green, vertical lines, with color all from the top meaning flowers.

*

The first time I peel back the 5 squares of Scotch tape, unfold the crooked-crease fold of art class paper, I am in my living room.

It is June.
Inside of the card, there is one long word, & then Estefani's name:

Loisfoeribari

Estefani Lora

*

Loisfoeribari?

*

Loisfoeribari: The scientific, Latinate way of saying hibiscus.

*

Loisforeribari: A direction, as in: Are you going North? South? East? West? Loisfoeribari?

*

I try, over & over, to read the word out loud.
Loisfoeribari. LoISFOeribari.
LoISFOEribari. LoisFOERibARI.

*

What is this word?

I imagine using it in sentences like,

"Man, I have to go back to the house, I forgot my Loisfoeribari."

or

"There's nothing better than rain, hot rain, open windows with music, & a tall glass of Loisfoeribari."

or

"How are we getting to Pittsburgh?"

Should we drive or take the Loisfoeribari?"

*

I have lived 4 minutes with this word not knowing what it means.

*

It is the end of the year. I consider writing my student, Estefani Lora, a letter that goes:

To The BRILLIANT Estefani Lora!

Hola, querida, I hope that you are well. I've just opened the card that you made me, and it is beautiful. I really love the way you filled the sky with birds. I believe that you are chula, chulita, and super fly! Yes, the card is beautiful. I only have one question for you. What does the word 'Loisfoeribari' mean?

*

I try the word again.

Loisfoeribari.

Loisfoeribari.

Loisfoeribari.

*

I try the word in Spanish.

Loisfoeribari

Lo-ees-fo-eh-dee-bah-dee

Lo-ees-fo-eh-dee-bah-dee

& then, slowly,

Lo is fo e ri bari

Lo is fo eribari

*

love is for everybody

love is for every every body love

love love everybody love

everybody love love

is love everybody

everybody is love

love love for love

for everybody

for love is everybody

love is forevery

love is forevery body

love love love for body

love body body is love

love is body every body is love

is every love
for every love is love
for love everybody love love
love love for everybody
loveisforeverybody

Last words on *Teeth* --- Sigh. Sigh Again. Glorious. Go. Buy. The. Book.

[Lisa Alvarado](#) is a poet, novelist, and performance artist. She is the author of *The Housekeeper's Diary*, *Reclamo*, and *Sister Chicas*. In 2007, *Sister Chicas* was the 2nd place winner of the Mariposa/International Latino Book Award for Best 1st Novel in English. She also shares her views and literary criticism on La Bloga.

Comments

