

The Nomenclature of Small Things

a new poetry collection by Lynn Pedersen

“For its breadth and passion, its vision and architecture, one combining evolution, biology, history, religion, and geology...*The Nomenclature of Small Things* is one of the most moving first books that I have read in years.”

— Mark Irwin, *Large White House Speaking*



Lynn Pedersen’s debut poetry collection, *The Nomenclature of Small Things*, explores grief through the language of science, history, and art. From Charles Darwin to Carl Linnaeus, from the passenger pigeon to fossil ammonites, each poem seeks to name, to enumerate, to order—to claim a particular place for the human creature in a catalog of extinction and loss.

Pedersen’s poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *New England Review*, *Ecotone*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Borderlands*, and *Other Countries: Poets Rewiring History*, and she has previously published two chapbooks: *Tiktalik*, *Adieu* (2014) and *Theories of Rain* (2009). A graduate of the Vermont College of Fine Arts, Pedersen lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where she is pursuing environmental writing with an interest in biodiversity, sustainability, and renewable energy.

“This is a book in which mortal things matter enormously. Against the loss of species, against miscarriages, against disappearance: these poems of intelligence, sadness and beauty. I loved this book.

—Nancy Eimers, *Oz*

“Here are poems quietly wise, beautiful, beguiling, and enriched by the peculiarities and spectacularities of science. Guiding them is a poet tough-skinned but tender-hearted...These are poems to savor and/or devour.

—Nance Van Winckel, *Pacific Walkers*

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click or scan to hear Garrison Keillor
read Lynn Pedersen’s poem “Why We Speak English.”

Q&A with Poet Lynn Pedersen



“These poems weave multiple narrative threads together to explore individual experience against a larger backdrop of science and society.” –Lynn Pedersen

Q: Can you talk a bit about the content of the book? What’s it all about?

A: *The Nomenclature of Small Things* is a book about loss, about the disappearance of species and family, about the passage of time. The poems explore grief through a lens of science, history, and art. The spark for the book came after I spent many years dealing with pregnancy loss. I noticed a pattern to grief, and I wanted to explore that pattern as well as the lack of terminology for grief in daily language. I wanted to know if science could be used as a filter to process grief, if language and taxonomy could be used to name and pin down what we deem important, what we want to remember and keep.

Q: We don’t always think of science and poetry as bedfellows; what role does science play in these poems?

A: Science functions as metaphor, as underlying structure, as vocabulary, as a process of asking questions and seeking answers. That last one is my favorite to work with—questions and research and hypotheses and corrections. I enjoy being wildly creative within a framework of facts. Each poem tentatively steps out as a trial experiment of a hypothesis—that the language of science can make sense of grief, that language has the power to hold fast.

Q: What about the title of the collection? How’d you arrive at *The Nomenclature of Small Things*?

A: Linnaeus and his work with taxonomy inspired the framework for the collection. I wrote the science-themed grief poems first, poems that contained astronomy metaphors, telescopes, the vastness of space, and later I wondered about small things—microscopes and Robert Hooke’s work and tiny organisms and cells and objects we cannot see.

Q: How did the book take shape?

A: I started as an essayist, then began writing poetry after university. I eventually decided to continue my studies through the writing program at Vermont College of Fine Arts. Poetry as a form is attractive to me because I can express myself in ways that I can’t in other genres, and I tend to like shorter literary forms. The process of writing this book happened over a period of eight years. I wrote the first two-thirds while attending Vermont College, and the last third was a long, slow slog of living through to the answers to the questions raised in the book.

Q: What do you hope that readers will take away from the experience of reading these poems?

A: To connect with a reader through a line, an image, a shared experience—that would be fantastic! We are all finite, mortal beings, and I hope readers will recognize some aspect of themselves in these many voices, come away with a sense of shared humanity. 🌸