

SACRIFICIAL STEEL

CATE MCGOWAN

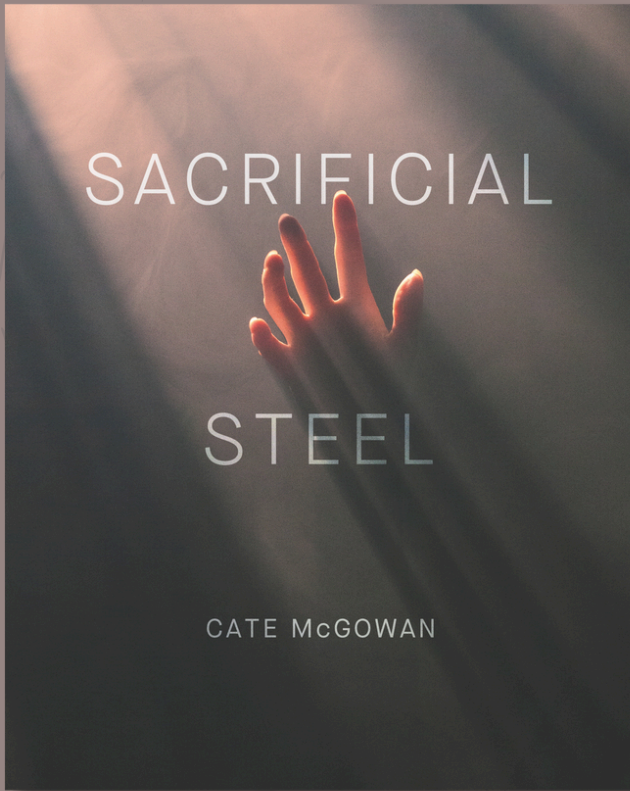
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CATE MCGOWAN'S SACRIFICIAL STEEL

uses art, history, and complex, musical poetic lines and forms to explore the biggest question we have as humans: what does it all mean?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cate McGowan is an artist, critic, historian, and the author of three books. Her collection of memoir essays, *Writing is Revision*, will be published by De Gruyter Brill in 2024, and her novel, *These Lowly Objects*, appeared with Gold Wake Press in 2020. McGowan's short story collection, *True Places Never Are*, won the Moon City Press Short Fiction Award in 2014 and was a finalist for the Lascaux Prize. Cate's poetry, essays, and stories have appeared in numerous literary outlets, including Norton's Flash Fiction International, *Glimmer Train*, *The North American Review*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Chestnut Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Citron Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Tahoma Literary Review*. Professor McGowan (known as McG to her students) holds an M.F.A. and Ph.D. and is currently pursuing another advanced degree at Johns Hopkins University. She regards teaching as her lifeblood and lives in Florida with her husband and animal family, but remains deeply connected to her progressive Southern roots in Atlanta, Georgia.



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PAGE ONE

"*Sacrificial Steel* is a stunning debut collection, bright as a lighthouse flashing into the dark. These poems hide from nothing, illuminating truths about both the vicious and beautiful possibilities of our world. They embody the sublime and are breathtaking in their precise candor."

**—ERICA WRIGHT,
AUTHOR OF ALL THE BAYOU STORIES END WITH DROWNED**

"A wonderful addition to contemporary poetry, Cate McGowan's *Sacrificial Steel* cuts lyric vision with punk swagger and mordant humor to examine womanhood, history, family, ecological disaster, and Southern identity. I am gobsmacked by the precision and restraint that characterize these impeccable poems—every syllable, every character, every space. Like her contemporaries, feminist poets Cynthia Cruz and Aracelis Girmay, McGowan possesses a fine intelligence that is matched only by her conscience. These poems affirm that it is now, as it has been, the poet's work to 'clock the universe's massacres, dark / soffits, underhanded sky.'"

**—CAROLYN HEMBREE,
AUTHOR OF FOR TODAY**

"*Sacrificial Steel* is as much a song of grief as it is ekphrasis of the art of survival. Steered by a guiding belief in the poet's role as musician and artist, Cate McGowan's debut collection dexterously navigates a range of human experience—from the specter of death in one girl's family to the ravages of our collective human impact on the natural world. On every page, McGowan witnesses the mixed bag of who we are—loving and leaving, violent and tender: 'We're corpuscles and kidneys, sweat and shit and spit,/ admixtures, fragile parts in fancy wrappings'—and calls us to resist the 'magnetism of demise.' 'Nothing's discouraged me,' the poet says. 'I shouldn't exist, yet I'm here.' Read this one slowly. Savor its music."

**—CYNTHIA MARIE HOFFMAN,
AUTHOR OF EXPLODING HEAD**

LETTER TO THE READER

DEAR READER,

I'm angry. There, I said it. I've been told I shouldn't be—that it's not ladylike, that it's not productive. Screw that. I'm pissed off at the way things have panned out, at the way people treat each other and this planet, at the raw deal my mother got, at the raw deal my dad got. At the raw deal I got.

But here's the thing: I'm also still thriving, writing through it and finding fragments of beauty along the way. This collection, *Sacrificial Steel*, is my way of making sense of all that rage, the inherited pain, and how it shapes us while we fight to be something more. I belong to a generation that doesn't believe in neat boxes or tidy labels—a generation that refuses to be categorized into clean narratives, much like my poetry. I was born in a time that expected me to be quiet, smile more, to be small—physically, emotionally, existentially. And yet here I am, refusing to shrink, speaking the only way I know how.

I think of my mother, who raised three kids on her own after my father died when I was nine. She bore the weight of it all—three children, a broken heart, the systemic failures that left women to fend for themselves in the aftermath of loss. She got a raw deal, and I knew I didn't want the same. I grew up fighting against the roles society expected me to adopt. I said no to motherhood, to the Church; I left behind the faith that tried to cage me, striving, aiming to be someone different somehow. I moved away, lived a wild, cosmopolitan life, raging against everything—I wanted to be anything but compliant. College helped me reorient, to find words instead of fists, stories instead of silence. Now, for some reason, I live in Florida. I'm stuck here. And yet, my father's death, my mother's struggle—they're etched into me. The raw deal didn't disappear; it just changed shape.

And here we are, with the arrival of an administration that doesn't value the voices of the marginalized, that seeks to silence dissent instead of listening to it. The rhetoric of censorship and book banning is a direct assault on my freedom to tell stories, on the very act of writing as resistance. They want us to sanitize the shelves, erase the uncomfortable truths, strip the voices of those who dare to challenge the status quo. Silence is not acceptable. We are undergoing an attack on literature, an attack on our right to exist fully and speak our truths without fear of reprisal.

LETTER TO THE READER

I'm one of those people who feels the weight of these policies. In the past, I've lived with threats to my autonomy, my access to healthcare, my very ability to survive. And I'm not alone, of course. The ones who suffer the most are those who bear the brunt of systemic injustice—women, the poor, people of color, the disabled, and artists who speak up when others prefer silence. Those who want complete control over our culture want us quiet. They want us compliant. But we know better than that; we know silence is complicity; we know our voices are the very steel we've forged through fire.

There's a reason I named this collection *Sacrificial Steel*. Steel is forged under fire, shaped by pressure and heat, and sacrifices must be made. It is strong, durable, yet malleable—armor that protects, but bears the blemishes of its making. That's what I hear in the voices of these poems: the women who wear the armor of society's expectations, who carry the weight of silence, who sometimes slip and show their scars—they're all forged by their experiences. And they have to decide what to carry forward and what to leave behind.

I belong to a generation that's not defined by age or labels, one that knows scars aren't badges of honor or marks of shame—they're simply evidence that we've survived. Mine is a generation that doesn't fit into photo filters or Instagram ideals. We worked after-school jobs, wore hand-me-down sneakers scuffed and outgrown, welcomed the scratch of a needle on vinyl, the howl of an electric guitar untouched by Auto-Tune. Like my cohort, I've learned to live through the raw edges, to make music that doesn't pretend to be anything other than what it is—a primal scream, a raw truth spoken behind a gas station in the parking lot that smells like teen spirit. It's all a way of saying: I lived, and I was here, even when the world demanded I perform and shut up.

I've tried to weave that ethos into these poems—the belief that life doesn't need to be polished to be beautiful, that rage and grief coexist with love and hope. This book is my attempt to make sense of the mess, to give voice to the anger, to carve out space for the untidy truths that don't fit into packaged narratives tied up with bows.

As you read *Sacrificial Steel*, I hope you hear not just my voice, but the voices of those who've been silenced, those who've been cast aside, those who rage but also believe in the magic of words, in their power to transform, to make us better. For all my anger, I still believe in beauty—in words that are raw, truthful, and resonant. That belief is what keeps me here, what keeps me writing. It keeps me alive.

**LIGHT AND LOVE AND A LITTLE RAGE,
CATE MCGOWAN**

EVERY BODY HAS GHOSTS

Below a yellowed tree,
weeds fringe the driveway's
borders. Anoles pump.

They jut, and the bigger
lizards skitter along
the yard's edge. While

daylight's needles stitch
threads the spathodea,
seven De Kay's brown snakes⁴

slue like scarves through
the new ivy. Though
it's already five o'clock,

I haven't heard from him
yet. Not this week.
Not this month. He's

gone with no word.
So far, silence. Green
quiet. Someone next door

opens a second-floor
window, and a toddler
shrieks, shatters the still air.

The child's cry skylarks
the mimosa, shrinks,
then dissipates through

the evening's haze. I shake
out our wet clothes.
In the breeze, the clothesline

snaps my red blouse
as it dances, my empty sleeves
waving in the wind to no one.