

MEMORIAL WITH LIMINAL SPACE

A NEW DRIFTWOOD PRESS
POETRY TITLE

Mitchell Untch's *Memorial With Liminal Space* is a staggering work of poetics that delves headfirst into the intersections of grief, faith, and identity. As the title suggests, these poems are equal parts dense and opaque, casting both light and shadow over the death of the poet's twin brother. Masterful language and visual inventiveness culminate in a collection that feels intimate and universal, timeless but arriving at a moment when the world is still reeling from the ravages of sickness.

"Mitchell Untch demonstrates, with his attentiveness to sensual details, how much there is to celebrate and sing: 'the hummingbird's / bright delving, a wakefulness that / cannot be described except that / it lives.'"

—Molly Bendall, author of *Watchful*



Mitchell Untch is an emerging writer. His publications include *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poet Lore*, *North American Review*, *Confrontation*, *Nimrod Intl*, *Natural Bridge*, *Baltimore Review*, *Wax Paper*, among others.

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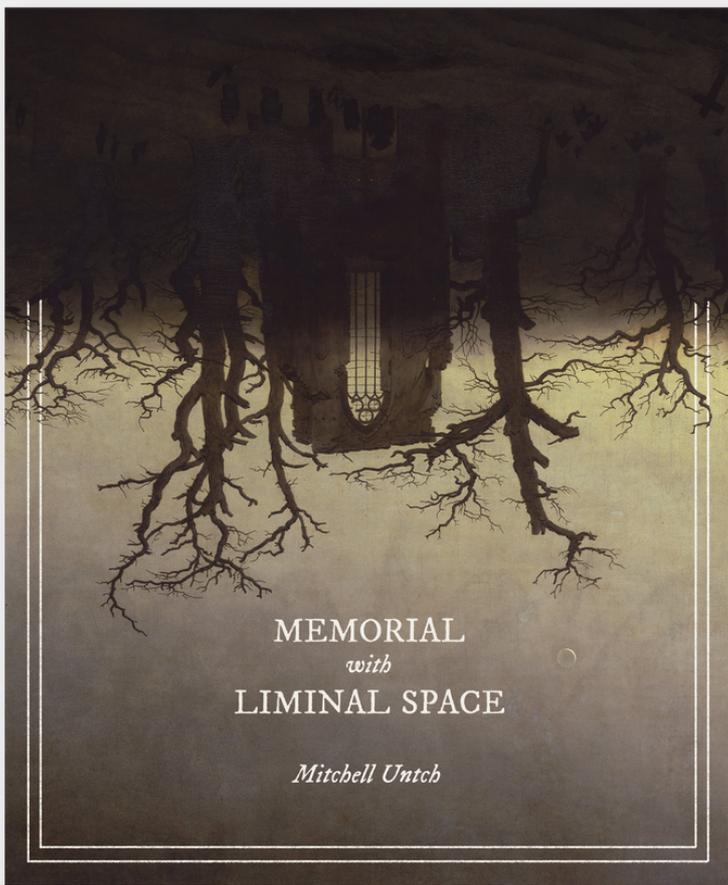
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ADVANCED PRAISE



“Poetry cannot best death. But poetry can make the best of it. ‘I need an answer. There are no answers,’ wisely writes Mitchell Untch. This talented poet pens a thesaurus of longing with his first book. His lyrics multiply with the nuances of loss: mainly the speaker’s twin from AIDS, but also the loss of a platonic Midwestern girlfriend—I’ve never read of this kind of unseen love in a more definitive manner.... Editors were ‘flooded’ by these poems. Little wonder. Reader, be flooded.”

—Spencer Reece, selected by Louise Glück as winner of the Bakeless Prize, for *The Clerks Tale*

“The focus of Mitchell Untch's stunning debut collection, *Memorial with Liminal Space*, pivots on leaving, leaving behind, having left, the undiscovered treasure or detritus. With gorgeous imagery, the poet searches for answers where there are none available—in nurses' stations, carnival booths, bodies of lovers, the past. Even Ronnie and Nancy Reagan, turn away in 1980's AID's pandemic blindness. Too much pain. Too much exquisite pain. As he writes in *Better Angels II*, No one was listening, and we had become fewer and less, / voices like brooms over sidewalks. If reason needs to find its way, the poems in *Memorial with Liminal Space* unearth a hidden pathway within. El Dorado. Atlantis. Shangri La. Eden.”

—Laurel Ann Bogen, author of *The Misread City* and winner of the Academy of American Poets Award

“The gorgeous and moving poems of Mitchell Untch’s *Memorial with Liminal Space* begin by looking back unflinchingly at the suffering and death of his twin brother from the HIV virus. We follow this poet as he laments through the ‘corridors of grief.’ And as he continues to journey into rooms and scenes from his past, he discovers he can cast a new, prismatic light on those dark moments, turning despair into grace and beauty. Mitchell Untch demonstrates, with his attentiveness to sensual details, how much there is to celebrate and sing: ‘the hummingbird’s / bright delving, a wakefulness that / cannot be described except that / it lives.’”

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LETTER TO THE READER

“Outside the city of Mexico, the sky is black, the Big Dipper, as big as you’d ever see it. You can see the perfect spacing of stars. There is nothing between them and us. There is nothing to interrupt them. They are seen as they once were. You cannot protect yourself from their beauty. You cannot protect yourself from what you know. There is no distance.”

A survivor of two major pandemics of this century, I’ve come to understand that there is no distance from any living thing. I’ve learned to carry with me everything I have experienced in my life. My experiences are a part of my flesh and bone. The air I breathe. This was never more relevant to me than when my twin brother died. When I look in the mirror I see him looking back at me. He died of a disease that I survived by a period of a few months. Cures arrived that he was too late to participate in. A circumstance that haunts me to this day. I came to understand over the years that separation is a myth. That there is simply a carrying forward of our experiences. Many times, when I go on long walks, I talk to all the people in my life who’ve impacted me, whether dead or alive. I speak their names. They are buried inside me. It’s as if I were standing in a graveyard running my finger over their names etched in stone, rounding out their vowels, tracing their consonants. As this happens my other senses kick in. I begin to hear them. I begin to see them. If all we are as human beings is spirit, then how does any living human being ever leave us. In my mind there is no leaving, no taking away. Continuity is everywhere in life. Where there is death there is resurrection.

I grew up in a middle white class suburban household in Southern California. When I was very young, my birth mother divorced my father and left him to raise my brothers and I on his own, a total of four sons. My stepmother brought three children of her own into the fold. She was unnaturally cruel to me and my four brothers. She separated us from the main part of the house. We were forced to eat different food than her children, often food my father would pull out of dumpsters in the back of restaurants. We would scrape coffee grounds off of hamburgers and have them for lunches. When one of my brothers was eight years old, and after a severe beating from my stepmother, he was shipped out of the household to go live with my birth mother. My father left him on a doorstep, never to see him again. At fifteen, my second brother was sent to live with my grandparents. My twin and I were then forced to live in a trailer on the side of the house and were only permitted to enter the main house to clean it. We were beaten mercilessly and often for no apparent reason. My twin and I lived in the trailer until we left the house when we were seventeen, my twin off to the enlist in the army, myself off to live in Los Angeles. I lost contact with both of my other brothers for several years and never saw them again.



In 1985, the AIDS crisis hit and took my twin brother away from me. I survived the pandemic by sheer luck. I became positive a few months after my brother and only survived because in that sort interval of time there were medicines that were being created that were saving lives. A few months separated our fates. In my collection, I write about this experience and the guilt I felt for having survived him. I also write about what was going on during the crisis, all the fear and horror that was going on at the time.

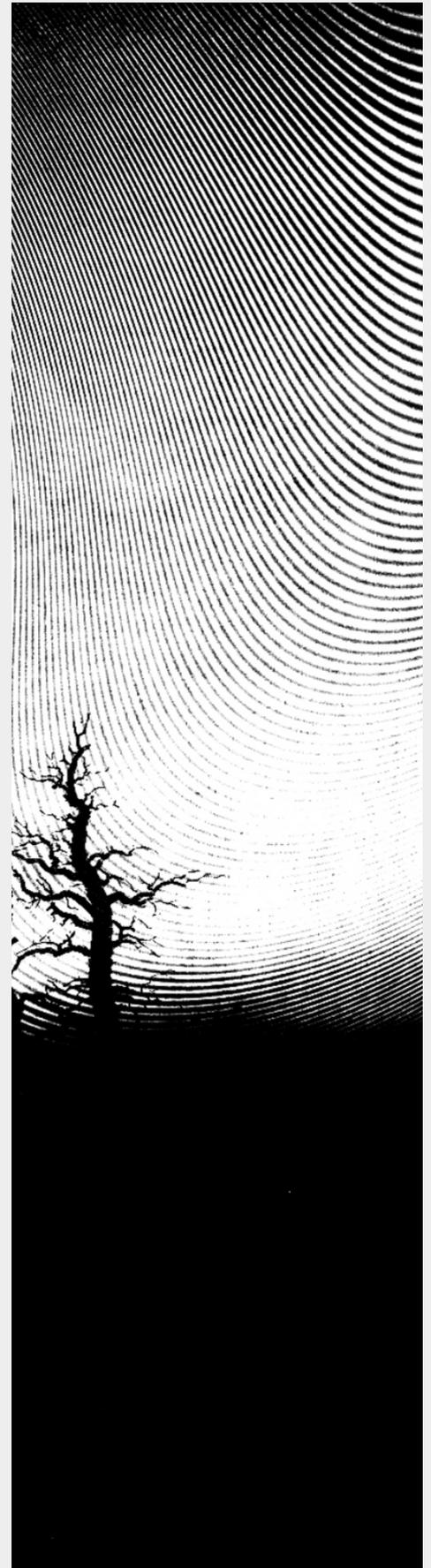
How people wouldn't touch you. How families were disowning their children. Protest signs were heralded at demonstrations "A.I.D.S is God's Will," "Let the Faggots Die," to name a few.

Later on, I discovered that I had a Great Aunt who lived in West Virginia. I write a lot about this "bucolic" part of my life and family and my experiences being there. The Mid-West carries its own voice. My task was to carry that voice to the reader. From the vastness of the land to the voice of its inhabitants.

I allowed the objects to speak to me—trees, bundles of hay, cows, roads, sky, clouds, the proximity of stars. My challenges was to inhabit the tempo of the region, it's customs, the heart's jurisdiction, the parameters of the mind. The poems included in my collection mirror the lengths of hours, the languorousness of the region.

I always lead with the heart when I write. I have to feel a poem there first. Based on that initial impulse, I am literally drawn into the process of writing. After that initial impulse, I go back to the work and begin the "thinking" process. When I get an idea for a poem, I sit down and write non-stop for ten or fifteen minutes, allowing the creative process to flow through me. I don't stop to think about what I'm writing at this point. I just write non-stop. This process allows me to write without "judgement." It's simply a pure creative, uninhibited impulse. I allow my subconscious to do its thing. It's smarter than me. It's always a danger to write about something that is so universally talked about. But again, everyone one is unique. Trust the uniqueness of your being. No two hearts are alike. Express individuality. Only you and you alone own this connection to "self."

—Mitchell Untch



Ingress

Nothing stops him from opening
my mouth, entering quiet rooms
of my body, scent of his skin,

lips red as camellias.
If I speak his name no difference.
He always whispers in my ear.

I take him in, this grief.
He runs his fingers through the thickening
shadows of my hair.

Sometimes my food tastes of him
as a word enters my mouth.
He salts my tongue in the dark.

I see him only when I've stopped
looking. Like countless lanterns
through my ribs, up the long

ladder of my spine. He drifts
through the chambers of my heart.
Brilliant, this grief never dims.

I can't look at him directly
no more than I can stare
into the face of the sun.

Knees, hips, shoulders, arms.
I am back to him on all fours,
a moon on water.

I lift his body. He lifts mine.
My wrists swell. You can read

when something reminds it
of what it once was, how an arm
once fell. Sometimes, I just

want to be recognized.
He comes to help me remember,
everything about you that was alive.

POEM EXCERPTS

Before the Wedding

Early morning, the two of us up.
I slip downstairs to the bathroom.
Floorboards creak. They are just getting to know me.
In the kitchen, June turns the coffee pot on.
Fits of steam gurgle, a hospital of newborns.
I open the newspaper, wander up
and down petite plumbed columns, pages
whisper, leaves swept up by a broom.
June enters with two coffee mugs.
We warm our hands around them.
I have something I want to show you she says.
She unbuttons her nightgown.
The collar falls open like wings, perhaps petals.
Perfume escapes into the room.
This is where the doctors cut me open, she says.
Glue dilates in the extractions.
A compound of adhesive keeps her skin from tearing.
The scarring—a drowned-out purple-violet,
as if torn open by rain,
rises from breastbone to breastbone.
I had the doctor cut them both off, she says.
Calm sustains her equanimity and mine.
She's eighty-four, my mother's sister.
I have come for her wedding tomorrow.
Western shadows lean away from daylight.
Eastern bluebirds pick up their squabbles.
She buttons her blouse, now petals, now closed.

