

Susan L. Leary's *More Flowers* is her fifth published poetry collection and second publication with Trio House Press. The book is a declaration of resilience in the face of perpetual adversity against girls and women alike. Lili Gourley, supporting editor at Trio House Press, had the opportunity to talk with Susan about this new, exciting collection.

Lili Gourley: *More Flowers* is an internal and external exploration of womanhood in its many facets, and at this point, seems more necessary than ever. Can you tell us about your process for writing this book and your mindset while putting these poems to paper?

Susan L. Leary: *More Flowers* was initially written as my MFA thesis, but my work on these poems was interrupted when my brother, Brian, died, at which point I began working obsessively on *Dressing the Bear*. During this time, I also moved from Miami, FL, my home of over 20 years, to Indianapolis, IN, so it was a period of great emotional and physical upheaval. In a sense, two very different versions of myself wrote *More Flowers*, my pre- and post-grief selves. I also do not like anything to go to waste, be it a scrap of fabric or morsel of food. My Nana taught me that, so when I finished *Dressing the Bear*, I knew I wanted to return to these poems, dust them off and bring *More Flowers* to completion. When I speak of girlhood or womanhood, I am using these terms to hold a broader, more intense narrative of criticism I experienced most of my life, particularly as it relates to the body and the voice. I have never fully belonged either, and the experience of being a girl is the closest approximation to belonging I can achieve.

My writing process was both internally and externally driven. That first version of myself drew on memory, imagination, and the deep, private archive of my mind, but living in Indianapolis, suddenly I was able to acknowledge myself through a new environment that was entirely outside of me. I was unfamiliar with winter and had never seen a swan before or a landscape change, so images of this nature are replete throughout the collection. The past me and present me are very much colliding.

LG: With your expansive list of publications, what does your submission process look like? How does it differ between individual poems versus full length manuscripts?

SL: My submission process for individual poems as well as chapbook and full-length manuscripts is very similar and involves a mentality of sending out the work and genuinely hoping for the best. I write each day, and once I have a packet of poems or a completed manuscript, I identify 5-10 venues to submit my work to, generally guided by intuition and, as silly as it sounds, my particular mood that week. From there, I engage in research, paying close attention to the kinds of poems each journal publishes as well as to the thematic and aesthetic concerns of the poets on the masthead. I understand "fit" can be elusive to pin down, but I am

selective, choosy even, because I want my work to resonate with editors, and I try to honor my hope in that as best I can in my submission process.

LG: Your work is often inspired by familial relationships and how they have shaped you. This collection specifically looks at mother-daughter. Can you talk about the experience of writing about such relationships? How did writing about them affect how you saw them?

SL: Family is the stage upon which everything plays out, and my family members are the most important people in my life, so it feels natural to write about them. A difficult fact, however, is that each child inherits the world of her guardians. In my case, I entered a world governed by the rules, conditions, and emotional temperature set by my mother, and my agency was tied to how well I navigated that environment. But, in writing these poems, I realized a mother and daughter can co-create their shared existence if the mother provides that opportunity, which mine did, and that, to me, is love. Of course, family is hard. One of its greatest complications is the way a child's perspective can be silenced and invalidated by those she loves despite every effort to be heard. I have the rare gift of a mother who listened, who expressed genuine regret and incredible self-awareness when I showed her my wounds. I reference this aspect of our relationship in the poem, "Now That My Mother Has Apologized," which is one of the most meaningful poems of the collection to me and one I return to often. With each read, I am reminded a daughter has a voice at the table and not just on the page.

LG: In a similar vein, in poems like "The Fifth Swan," you offer a lot of introspection and exploration of your child-self—you write "...the soul must sit down to make amends." How has your perception of yourself changed in the course of writing this book?

SL: I wouldn't say my perception of myself has necessarily "changed," but I have always felt quite invisible, even to those I am closest with in my life. At the same time, I have always been deeply visible to myself. I am rather dialed in to my emotional layers, and I have accepted it is okay to be my own audience. Sometimes, I am the only one watching myself move through the world, and there is real beauty, even honor, in that. It is for this reason the swan at the close of the poem you reference is also "reinvented." Here, the swan embraces herself as her own witness alongside the speaker who "makes amends" by forgiving herself for not previously recognizing the value in self-understanding. In this way, witness is a form of self-care.

LG: *Dressing the Bear*, winner of the 2023 Louise Bogan Award, was a heartfelt and devastating ode to your late brother. How did the writing process differ from the elegiac style of writing about a loved one to a more forceful conversation on the internal and external struggles of womanhood?

SL: There are two facts that rub up against each other in my response to this question. One, the worst thing that has happened to me in my life is my brother dying, and two, the most difficult thing for me to do in my life is talk about myself. When my brother died, I wanted to write about him. In fact, I couldn't not write about him, and I leaned readily, and obsessively, into grief. You aptly notice that the poems of *More Flowers* are "more forceful" because I must genuinely exert myself to communicate the material of my deeper emotional recesses on the page. As unsophisticated as it sounds, it is really, really hard, sometimes impossible, and in thinking about it further, that elegy is less rigorous for me than self-talk; well, I am not sure if that is absolutely wild or to be expected. What, also, might it mean that the tragic and painfully troubling circumstances of our lives are a worse enemy to confront than death? I do not wish to know.

LG: *More Flowers* reckons with both "gods" and capital-G "God." You even write that "...our mothers are the only real gods..." Why was this meditation with higher powers (positive or negative) important for this collection?

SL: This is a very difficult question. I was raised Catholic, and while I no longer regularly attend Mass, I still believe heavily in the spiritual aspects of existence, so when I reference capital-G "God," I imagine him to be kind, patient, and well-meaning. On the other hand, my use of "gods" is suggestive of a self-serving, more manufactured power, often a stand-in for men, the patriarchy, and the infinite obstacles meant to stifle girls and women. Throughout the collection, I am walking that fine line between power and love, thinking extensively about how these two conditions dictate my ability to, again, belong, be made visible, and affirmed. In a perfect world, it is something like this: you always want to be in God's favor but not because God is more powerful than you, but because God loves you.

LG: How did you decide the title *More Flowers*? Did the title or the poem "In Lieu of Flowers, More Flowers" come first?

SL: About eight years ago, during the first semester of my MFA, we were asked to write a love poem to ourselves, a prompt that resulted in my poem, ["Instructions for Childless Woman upon Burial, or Love Poem to Self,"](#) which also contained the line, "in lieu of flowers, more flowers," an image and a concept I was quite enamored with at the time. I love flowers. They are beautiful, and they are like us, most alive in the process of their dying. They hang on as long as they can, too. Their strength is their fragility, and their fragility is their strength. Naturally, I was compelled to borrow this line for the title of my MFA thesis, and years later, I returned to it again, writing a poem with the line as its title, which is the poem that appears in this collection.

"In lieu of flowers, more flowers" has become a constant, stable, relentless bit of language in my life, and I am grateful it refuses to abandon me. Funny enough, I had originally planned to title this manuscript after another poem, "Encore to Girlmaking," but then Kris Bigalk, executive

director of Trio House Press and my editor, suggested *More Flowers*, and the moment she shared it, I knew it was perfect. I thank her for that. I should add that as I've gotten older, I realize death is creeping closer and closer to me, a fact I do not like. As cruel, devastating, unjust and ugly as the world can be, it is also wonderful, and I never want *this* to end—whatever all *this* really is—so I am constantly glomming on to this concept of *more, more, more* and that desire, or obsession, with excess really informs this book.

LG: What is your favorite poem in this collection, one that you're particularly proud of or satisfied with?

SL: "Strawberry Season" immediately comes to mind. It is a love poem to my mother, through which I position her as a creator, someone who shapes my world through subtle, everyday acts of care and wisdom and fierce, subversive brutality. My mother is an absolute beast—I say this as sincerely, intimately, and aspirationally as I can—and I love her for it. She is sharply articulate and impossibly psychic in her perceptions, too, seeing the world unfold before it does, cautiously and dramatically pointing things out to me, saying *here—look*. My mother has never failed to remind me that in my most defeated and devastatingly fragile moments, I am still alive, and that my enemies, real or imagined, will fall first. Formally, "Strawberry Season" is also my take on the sonnet. Here, I use associative leaps, fragmented syntax, and lyrical compression to build intensity, the "turn" arriving through a dramatic shift in tone and slipping, finally, into a couplet of gratitude and marvel: "Thank god for my mother, / her minor invention of language. Only a man's truth shudders / at the feet of lions. Not all animals go somewhere to die." As an aside, this poem was originally published in [*The Arkansas International*](#), one of the literary journals I admire most, and later translated into Italian for *Detonatore Magazine* by Matteo Fais, a beautifully kind and surprising honor.

LG: Who are the poets or artists that have helped shape you as a writer?

SL: Cynthia Marie Hoffman, who offered a brilliant and generous blurb for *More Flowers*, writes fearlessly about the self in ways I can only imagine, and in so many of her poems, surreal language shimmers into experience that is hauntingly, and exquisitely, real to me. Also, Chelsea Dingman, who interrogates family dynamics, geography, and the female body with the most striking, innovative sequences of images. I truly believe there is no one writing like her today, and I find her work to be beautifully, and bravely, torrential. I never stop returning to Mark Irwin's poems either, particularly those of his collection, *Tall If*, because he is always reaching towards the spiritual, the life beyond this life or, perhaps, the one mysteriously inside it.

LG: What are you working on now?

SL: I talk about this often, so please forgive me for repeating myself. Currently, I am at work on a chapbook length manuscript of response poems to the daily journal entries my brother penned while in county jail during the summer of 2020 for addiction-related offenses. He kept this journal with the hope I would write an accompanying poem for each entry, and we planned to publish our work together. Though the world told him otherwise, he believed his voice mattered, and so did I. His death, just eight days after his release, has since given our project deeper, more heartfelt significance. I enjoy working with my brother's text and commingling our perspectives, but it can be painfully difficult. Part ekphrastic, part documentary poetics, part social justice project, and part collaboration, my goals are to challenge the dehumanization of the carceral state; interrogate the experience of the pandemic in the jail system; explore poetry's potential for empathy and activism; and honor the love that exists, and always will exist, between me and my brother.

LG: What do you hope your readers get out of reading *More Flowers*?

SL: I hope when readers engage with these poems they encounter a new way of looking at themselves they haven't yet considered. I hope they believe more fervently it is good to be seen, and I hope there is an idea that wows them. I especially wish for them more flowers.