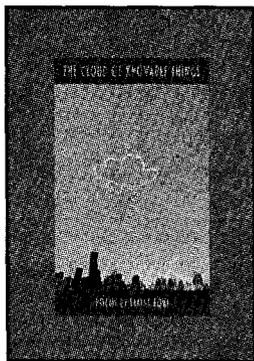


THE CLOUD OF KNOWABLE THINGS

Elaine Equi

Coffee House Press (\$15)



The poet Elaine Equi is an acquired taste—or perhaps it would be better to say, she has herself acquired some unique tastes, and the pleasure of reading *The Cloud*

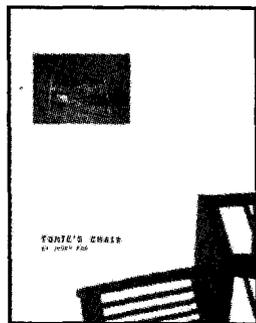
of Knowable Things is to discover them. Take, for example, how she sees “The Objects in Catalogs”: “A bit vulgar, like starlets / the objects pose, pausing / as though in midsentence. The comparison seems outrageous, yet also deft and apt. Such writing can border on the precious, a danger Equi doesn’t always avoid; but more often her outlandish examinations, as if by misadventure, back their way into explosive topicality. For instance, her excursion on yelling goes from family trauma (“My father screamed whenever the phone rang”) to broader, crazier characterizations (“At school, they called screaming ‘recess’ / or sometimes ‘music’”) and ends up as a significant comment on the abrasiveness of American society.

Equi’s serious side also appears in relation to her obsession with objects—objects in Japanese novels, objects in Beckett, “Bad Objects.” Many of these poems are elegies for the underappreciated junk of our throwaway culture. Other poems, also in this vein, praise great literature—not for plot, characterization, worldly insight, or style, but because master writers allow objects to exhibit all their variable, lovely qualities, free from commodity chains. Readers can vicariously share this freedom; as she puts it in “The Objects in Fairy Tales,” “Shoes of Fortune, / Magic Beans, / are unlike objects / in magazines / for they awaken / us against our will / from the spell of abject / longing for more.” ♦ (James Feast)

TOMIE’S CHAIR

Josey Foo

Kaya Press (\$13.95)



Inspired by artist Tomie Arai’s 1996 mixed-media installation “Arrival,” Josey Foo’s second book of poetry, *Tomie’s Chair*, is theatrical in the way a modern art museum is theatrical—

that is to say, it moves us through surrounding silence, white space, and designed juxtaposition. Throughout the slim book float various images of a straight-back painted-green wooden chair. Its resemblance to the human form is an inexplicit but present subtext—the chair is always “empty” and therefore awaits purpose, “The *place* of confidences.” Each poem begins with an enigmatic title, sometimes narrative but anonymous, as in “A woman is coming to a decision,” but more often a single word: “Wing,” “Meandering,” “Woodland,” “Threshold.”

A heart beats here, but quietly, almost as a non-participant. Sometimes the narrator gives monk-like commands that turn into

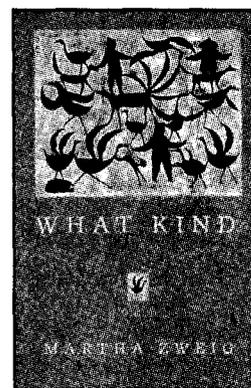
statements about the self and its past, forming a dreamy, depersonalized “I”: “Rest your feet in my hands. / Now wade through the stream side by side. / For years I’ve been my sail and wind.” Foo’s time-and-space-flattened existentialism is shot through with a resilient sense of material beauty and wonder—“I am saving pebbles, falling in / with sparrows’ glimmer in the yard”—despite a larger sense of immateriality and mutability. The speaker expresses conjoined conditions “of knowing I am alive and wanting not to be alive; of being bullied by silence and permitted by silence to be situated where I am. It is the way that I know how to remain, even now, not getting up from my chair.”

A symbolic house’s architecture is rich with signature and exits, if not always entrances: “Here signs the way when I rise / from my chair, my body now at the door. / Door becomes a step on a riverbank. / The riverbank, its blue wind.” There is stated resistance, the kind that city-dwelling readers especially may relate to: “My life is not made of small rented spaces.” Through these kinds of verbal acts—of vicinity, visibility, and motion—Foo creates a subtle poetry searching for its own architectural events. ♦ (Sun Yung Shin)

WHAT KIND

Martha Zweig

Wesleyan University Press (\$12.95)



Martha Zweig’s 1999 collection *Vinegar Bone* presented an earthy voice imbued with both the honesty and the brutality one imagines could come from rural life, a hybrid of Lorine Niedecker’s candor and Sylvia Plath’s heady, violent word-play. In *What Kind*, Zweig’s voice is still fresh and vibrant, but the poems are so of a piece that it is hard to believe they were written over 30 years. While this sameness grows a bit tiresome, it is perhaps evidence of Zweig’s pure vision, and her delight in language is exhilarating, even if the imagery repeats.

What Kind is a witchy book, the poems are tricky, full of animal familiars and swamps and dark love. It is often the crone speaking, like the narrator of “Between Floors” who admits “I’ve / fastened my evil veil on, / stuck it with its toad- / headed long hairpin / in my high bun.” Often recalling Heather McHugh in her sonic twists, Zweig’s poems swerve between arcane and vernacular diction, as in the opening lines of “Scarecrow”: “Pitiful sticks, d’ye know me? / I hang on yr knots & nag birds.” The poems also veer between sweetness and gore, relishing both: in “False Memory,” a baby “dialed up / myself the house of murder,” where the family dog licks at “the tacky blood.” In such company, the standout poems are the simplest, and thus most potent. In “Not Mowing,” the speaker considers her overgrown lawn (“When we turn it snags our skin, and seeds”) only to turn towards something murkier in the last two lines: “I could be willing to die. Even running through the yard / to tell you something, I could be.”

Perhaps *What Kind* should be kept in the garden, or by the woodstove, and read over the course of the next 30 years, as it was written; Zweig is a wise woman, and the poems reveal themselves like a good poison, over time. ♦ (Arielle Greenberg)