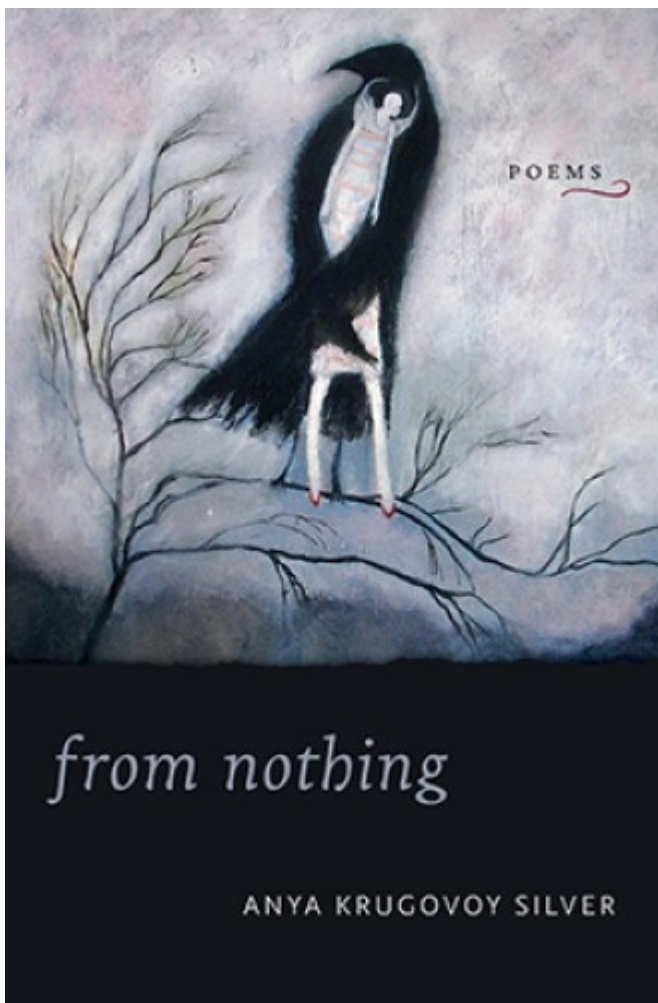


Poetry *ex nihilo*

Anya Silver's imaginative poems speak from nothingness into new creation.

by [Scott Cairns](#) in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue

In Review



From Nothing

Poems

By Anya Krugovoy Silver
Louisiana State University Press

Taking her lead—as well as her provocative title—from the John Donne poem that introduces her own introductory poem, Anya Krugovoy Silver continues, in her third poetry collection, to develop her ongoing and—one discovers—efficacious fascinations with illness and loss and with the strenuous, deliberate act of recovery. In this collection, she has found a manner of consolation in her being, as Donne has written, “re-begot / Of absence, darkness, death: things which are not.”

As it happens, these poems are remarkably personal, etched in the midst of the poet’s own trials with illness, suffering, and grief. For all their autobiographical specificity, however, the poems nonetheless partake of, inform, and illumine what we might recognize more generally as our common condition.

The introductory poem, “From Nothing,” asserts:

Again and again, from nothingness I’m born.
Each death I witness makes me more my own.
 . . . One day, my spine’s long spar will snap,
ribs tumbling loose; my face will droop and drop.
Then I’ll be re-begot—the air will shimmer
and my molecules will vault, emerging free.
From darkening days, the light will surge and flee.

There is a profound assertion here drawn from an even deeper well than the poetry of Donne, a well whose waters are troubled beyond the perhaps familiar gesture of *creatio ex nihilo*.

One such font is found in *The Triads* (circa 1341) of St. Gregory Palamas. He observes: “It should be remembered that no evil thing is evil insofar as it exists, but insofar as it is turned aside from the activity appropriate of it, and thus from the end assigned to this activity.” At the heart of such a surprising assertion lies the understanding that life—and abundant life, at that—is the human person’s natural state. Illness and death are patently aberrations and, in the fullness of human experience and finally, *things which are not*.

Drawing from even deeper waters, one comes upon the homilies of St. Isaac of Syria, who wrote in the seventh century,

Sin, Gehenna, and Death do not exist at all with God, for they are effects, not substances. Sin is the fruit of free will. There was a time when sin did not exist, and there will be a time when it will not exist. Gehenna is the fruit of sin. At some point in time it had a beginning, but its end is not known. Death, however, is a dispensation of the wisdom of the Creator. It will rule only a short time over nature; then it will be totally abolished.

The “evil one” himself, according to St. Isaac, has no intrinsic being or natural existence but is merely the name given to what might appear a uniquely unfortunate negation of what is. “Satan’s name,” St. Isaac writes, “derives from voluntarily turning aside from the truth; it is not an indication that he exists as such naturally.”

Springing from a deep and early church tradition—too often eclipsed in the West—such observations provide a useful key to our entering Silver’s remarkable poems. That key opens the passage to apprehensions more suggestive, even, than our being created from no preexistent thing, but also the sense of our being rescued from a certain sort of tyranny: those undue anxieties occasioned by the existential nothings of illness, sin, and death.

The stuff of these poems—the lush substance evoked in nearly every line—can be read as the soul’s strenuous recovery of *something* salutary from the very *nothing*—the aberrant nothing that our ancient, inherited human penchant for turning away has yielded. Silver’s poems celebrate the human capacity to persist.

I stand in Walgreens while my mother sleeps.
The store is fluorescent and almost empty.
My father is ailing in a nursing home,
my friend is dying in the hospital.
What I want tonight is lipstick.
As pure a red as I can find . . .
Back in my mother’s apartment, silence.
I limn my lips back out of my wan face.
They are there again: smacky and wanting.

They also perform the imagination's capacity to speak from kenotic privation into new creation.

I remember my parents murmuring
histories I knew I shouldn't hear,
nights when my sister and I lay in our rooms,
she sleeping and I thinking up stories
in which I possessed powers far beyond my own,
able to make the sun blister and the clouds bloom.

These poems—which are linguistically textured and laden with rich sonic echo—provide Silver's reader with an exhilarating proposition: that recovery must become again our central human concern.

The same morning I press my shorn chest
against an X-ray machine and hold my breath,
my sister births from her body a baby girl.

Among the many recoveries manifested in Silver's subtle arguments, the very heart of her matter in this collection is an insistent recovery of common life. The speaker—ostensibly identified with the poet herself—admits to her own bodily sufferings, but a good many of these poems speak to and of the bodily sufferings of others. Employing classical and historical allusion as well as references to friends and family, Silver articulates in no uncertain terms an emphatic empathy that recovers for us what it means to be a person in the image of a triune God. Each of our lives partakes of every other.

I am reminded here of that very strange passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians wherein the apostle claims to rejoice in his own sufferings, adding that he "fill[s] up in my flesh what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). As I have observed elsewhere, instead of "what is lacking," a more likely translation of *isterimata* might be "what is yet to be done."

Silver grapples with an array of difficult human experiences to bring back into view the absolute interconnectivity of persons, and she presents the compelling proposition that what is yet to be done is our bravely accepting the cost of bearing one another's afflictions, of becoming one. May it be blessed.