

Powe, Bruce. *Decoding Dust*. Seattle: NeoPoiesis Press, 2016. 162 pp.

*Decoding Dust: Connection through Fragmentation*

In its most basic form, and the basics are perhaps the best place to begin, B.W. Powe's *Decoding Dust* (Seattle, Washington: NeoPoiesis Press, 2016) serves as a collection of poetry that is roughly separated into eight parts. Each section is divided by symbols, which appear centered on blank backgrounds as they replace, or rather stand instead of, chapter titles. By alternating text with abstract symbols, Powe gives the reader momentary breaks from the pace of reading. The dividing pages promote a greater focus on the visual as opposed to the textual way in which the reader has been decoding the book prior to the dividing symbols. This oscillation between text and image serves to reset the focus of the reader - it becomes a kind of palate cleanser - when the reader returns to the text, they can begin anew with fresh eyes. While I hesitate to associate particular meaning to the symbols, as I do not have enough information to make claims, the oscillation between text and image, between one point and another, serves as an opening into Powe's work. If we begin with the idea that the symbols are a pause, a resetting, a breath in-between, then what must be examined is why that breath is so very necessary.

*Decoding Dust* asks the reader to "come quietly with me/into silent letters again", in the first poem of the book, titled *Reader* (1). The work begins with an appeal to the person holding it. That "you", the one holding the book, becomes fractured as Powe begins to use "you" to refer to various multiplicities. "You" is always an inherent call to the reader but it can also simultaneously function as a call to a lover, a specific person, and perhaps most profoundly, a call to the author himself. In creating a seemingly endless appeal to multiple variations of "you", Powe fragments the reading experience. His work forces the reader to take on multiple perspectives at a rapid pace, and in doing so attempts to reconnect disparate parts. For example in *Sadhaka*, the poem that follows the invitation of *Reader*, Powe writes, "Your map took me there/to the crack in the floor" to an unknown "you". In juxtaposing a specific address to the reader with an address to an unknown Powe creates self-awareness in the reader towards their role *as* the reader - in one poem the reader is the "you" and in another they distinctly feel that they are not. As

the reader progresses through *Decoding Dust* they begin to become comfortable in the multiplicity of “yous” they inhabit. The reader begins to accept that while the “you” of *Sadhaka* is not them, within that “you” there is something of “them”. This experience is replicated in the symbols, as the eighth dividing symbol is a circle formed by the seven symbols that occurred prior. The work comes full circle both literally and metaphorically. It is precisely this dizzying use of the personal pronoun “you” that necessitates a break.

The symbols serve to ground the reader in a tide of ever shifting perspectives. A chapter title would continue the fragmentation of those perspectives, as any word or sentence used can immediately be connected to the text prior and after that title in order to make sense of the text. As the text itself is centered around fragmentation, a chapter title would not create order so much as it would demand the reader to make sense of one more layer of perspective, one more fragmented part of a larger whole. The symbols function in a different way because they do not continue a textual narrative. They deny a clear, immediate, way in which to contribute to the understanding of each section and in doing so provide both a breath in-between, and a space of potentiality. While the reader can make associations with similar iconography, the ambiguous nature of the symbols allows them to simultaneously stand for anything, and nothing at all. In oscillating between text and image a necessary pause is created not only due to a change of medium, but because the two media function in different ways.

Formally, and in terms of content the poems are as shifting as the use of “you”, and for much the same purpose. Some like *Oceanic*, are three line stanzas, whereas *Auguries* spans seventeen pages. Some can be read, almost as though they are prose, while *PG18* in particular is a prayer. There are heavily referential poems that discuss outside texts, events, and technology, while others are personal and ambiguous in word choice. In the sources section included at the back, Powe notes that his poems are based, at least in part, on “misreadings” and “autoplagerism”, an amalgamation of things mis-remembered, and subconsciously remembered. The form and content of the poems reflect that *Decoding Dust* is an intentional amalgamation of various parts. The fragmentation of shifting form and content supports the fragmentation of the readers’ experience as they go through many variations of “you”. However, the rapid shifts in form can also leave the reader with a heightened awareness of the poems that may not resonate as strongly with

them either because of a dislike of the content, or a dislike of a formal technique such as a pun. When a reader experiences a poem they may enjoy juxtaposed against a completely different style of poem, the shift can be jarring and emphasize perceived faults. While the fragmentation and rapid pace with which the poems change style, content, and “you” creates the potential for a fascinating journey through multiple perspectives, it can simultaneously be read as jarring and abrasive. That is to say, the core weakness of *Decoding Dust* is also its strength. If the text is composed of fragments it becomes jarring. If the text is composed of fragments it becomes a work about multiplicity. It is the multiple “yous” of the poetry, the chameleon-like way the book shifts and forces the reader to shift along with it that brings *Decoding Dust* meaning. While the individual poems can be read as lovely fragments, the text functions best when read – as a whole.

That is not to say that some fragments are not stronger than others, or that *Decoding Dust* is solely concerned with the road taken by the reader. For all of its breadth, depth, and rapid shifts *Decoding Dust* is as much about its author as it is about the reader, and that is not a bad thing. “You” is not just the you holding the book; it is the “you” writing the book. That is something that comes through strongly in the frustration with language in *Metaphysics*: “There/ must/ be/ a communication/ greater/ than/ this sentence”(121). The dissatisfaction with being unable to convey what the author wanted, is made starkly visible to the reader, *Metaphysics* is a self-reflexive poem. While the poem speaks directly to the experience of its own writing, it also speaks to a greater difficulty in language, one that can be experienced by both the author and the reader. The poem is both an intimate entrance into the invisible work of writing, and a reminder of the limits of language. In *Auguries*, Powe writes “ ‘love can look like abandonment’ ” and this too, is dissatisfaction with communication in a different way. It is dissatisfaction with the limits of all forms of human communication, not just the textual (71). *Decoding Dust* connects the reader to the author by juxtaposing the personal grief of the author with a call to the reader. The focus of the work, when reading, draws the attention of the readers to themselves through the use of “you”, but in drawing the reader in – the author connects their experience to his own. This relationship between author and reader, too, is a kind of full circle. *Decoding Dust* is an attempt at a conversation between the two, and while that

conversation is limited by the boundaries of the page, as most work is, the explicit attempt at connection is present. It is no mistake that the second most common personal pronoun in the text is “my”. The text creates an endless feedback loop, a circle of abstract symbols connected by different points – the two largest ones being reader and author. Unfortunately, the reader cannot speak back. The text is a call into a void, it is a call to a place where text cannot touch, the lived embodied world where the reader is reading the book. To write with a “dead tree medium” is to leave the reader unable to write back despite a call from the author – it is always half of a conversation (1). *Decoding Dust* is inward looking and that is not a bad thing.

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