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## “I wanted that blue.”

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JOY PARKS

### **Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties**

by Felicia Luna Lemus

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 252 pages, \$23.

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**F**IRST you fall in love with the title. You imagine mismatched pieces of fragile china, translucent, in delicate greens and floral pinks. Your mind hand-feeds you memories of sweet petit fours, frosted pastel lavender and yellow, you smell jasmine tea steeping in a perfectly shaped tea pot, steam blooming from the spout like fragrant ghost petals.

Then you read *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* and realize that it has nothing to do with any of the above, but is instead a brilliantly simple, yet simply brilliant, tale of living a life split between conflicting cultures, with ingredients of young love, the quest for independence, the ties of family, heartbreak, poverty, lust, and learning thrown in. But that's not the whole truth either. There's a charming *Alice in Wonderland*-like quality to this book, beginning with the title, but also in the fact that the narrator seems to grow larger, more substantial, right before our eyes.

Leticia Marisol Estrella Torrez, a twenty-something film school grad who grooms gay boys' dogs—which allows her to spill out her femme fantasies in pink and peach puppy manicures—is valiantly building a lesbian life on her own terms, pirouetting between a lesbian identity that includes “shaved head and stomping boots, my adolescent dyke dick hard all the time” and the expectations of her terribly hard-loved Nana, who raised her to be a good Mexican-American woman. Leti, whose style is thrift shop dyke chic—all brown cotton socks and fake pearl choker—is given the most senseless but sensational lines, such as: “The static crackle jangle of my voice hummed warm reliable.” She struggles in lust and love but picks good friends, notably Nolan, who is rock solid, the kind of best friend buddy girl bro, the kind who introduces you to serious crush material to send you high, then circles round to rescue you when it all comes crashing down.

For the love in the love story, Leti meets K, who is deep, butch, and Greek, emitting the scent of Old Spice and revealing taut muscles in her boy cotton white tees. She is “candy heaven” to Leti. Their sex is sweet and almost frothy, but not in a cloying way, and the characters are able to wax ardently and earnestly about their feelings and hopes. But it's a love story without a future tense. The women's come-close-no-not-that-close style of courtship belies their struggle to discover how to love each other in ways that are real and sustainable. But there's also a freedom in how they search for a way of sharing a life that's free from the musty past, symbolized by Leti's apple green couch. “The way my bunny K and I were with each other, with each other's ideas, with each other's bodies, with our bodies together, it wasn't limited to teasing or rough or controlling like I had grown used to. I didn't have to bottom or top or be strong or coy. It was all that and none of that and the incredible everything in between.”

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*Trace Elements* is beautifully written, so much so that the debilitating losses take a while to hit home. When they do, it's a dark, dark thing, but a loss that shows who is friend and who is foe, and what it means to live within a community where lovers and friends crisscross in a myriad of configurations. And it proves that the ones who matter are those who stick around when they're needed.

Lemus has freed her prose from conventional sentence structure, letting it follow the patter of her thoughts, and has done so with a confidence that doesn't come naturally to many writers two and three times her age. She doesn't use words as single hits; she writes in broad strokes, and her brilliantly misplaced adjectives often allow moods and objects to feel more real, more taste-able and touchable than they would be if more plainly described. (“No question, I wanted blueberry gorgeous blue. ... Doodley-do. I wanted that blue. My tongue begged to be blue slurped.”) The author deserves praise for not showing us her MFA. She must have been a tough student, having something to say about everything. This is not writing that has been workshopped into sanitized Styrofoam; this is storytelling that's full and fleshy and uncontrolled, wherein lies its power.

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## Haunted Household

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CHRISTOPHER HENNESSY

### **The Room Where I Was Born**

by Brian Teare

University of Wisconsin Press. 112 pages, \$14.95

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**T**HE TITLE of Brian Teare's debut volume of poetry, *The Room Where I Was Born*, proves apt: it is indeed about origins, about confronting how the room, house, family, town, and finally trauma of our childhood can shape our relationship to self, language, and even our view of history.

Poetry is often said to “disturb”; Teare's poetry disturbs, not only in the usual sense of to “trouble” or to “break the tranquility of,” but also in the sense that one can disturb a stationary object, say, a glass of water, knocking it over, spilling its contents, breaking the glass. At times, the spilling is wonderfully messy: “Here, what hungers is lovely / cruel, is gore & gorgeous & godless. It knows / spots quickest to goad blood to bruise, / the gasp & spasm & green of smothering.” And as any good poet must, Teare also deftly carves out meaning from the rich suggestiveness of sound: “haus' that sibilant hiss haunts / the end...”

The first section of the book is devoted to telling in different ways the story of the narrator's brother's predatory sexual abuse and a family “turned against itself.” One of Teare's strengths is his use of fairy tales and folk myths to layer his story, to heighten the sense of drama, when creating his haunting (and haunted) world. In his myth of Sleeping Beauty, the sleeper is raped in her sleep by Prince Charming. In another poem, “The Milk-Father,” a man lures young boys out into the Alabama woods and feeds

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