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DEAD SHARK ON THE N TRAIN . Susana H. Case
(Broadstone Books, 2020)
by Jami Macarty, The Maynard Co-founder & Editor

The poems of DEAD SHARK ON THE N TRAIN are concerned with what it “feels like to be a woman,” and as such, explore body image, definitions of beauty, power struggles between genders, and the choices and complexities of a female’s “own salvation” when “[t]here’s no clear trail to follow.” The first section of the collection has dual foci. Poems that explore adolescence—a time when “we want to be royalty. / [w]e want everything we touch turning to gold”—are woven with poems that seek justice and redemption for girls and women—like Maria Callas, who “abdicated ... power, / agreeing to be a lesser “wife”” and Marilyn Monroe, “surrounded by 430 books” who “wanted to be thought astute.” The satisfaction of Case’s artistic do overs come from imagining, even believing, that women’s and girl’s lives “could be different” from the persistent danger lurking when “walking home alone.” The middle section of DEAD SHARK ON THE N TRAIN is a sequence of delineated and prose poems written in the ekphrastic mode that center their attention on the miniature true crime scene dioramas of Frances Glessner Lee. Lee’s visual and Case’s verbal recreations “examine the tableau” of violence against women in “gendered households,” where “[s]o often the killer is someone you know, / one you thought a friend.” Case joins Lee in wanting “you to think / about” the answers to such horrible questions as: “Oh God— / where is the baby girl?”; “Is that what she worked / so hard for?”; “Did the husband set the scene...?”; “Who is going to inform / the mother?” At this point in the collection, a woman’s adolescence and crime scene evidence are stark and grave examples of what a woman leaves behind. The third section of DEAD SHARK ON THE N TRAIN pulls together the collection’s focus on the remnants of a woman’s life and what it means for a woman to stay alive: “my hair on your pillow.” In order to leave something behind, a life has to be lived “like sharks that migrate freely, I travelled / to survive.” The question Case circles throughout: “what makes a man do that”? Both asking that question and shifting the response to how a woman survives her “rather terrifying” life, offers freedom from the bondage of the patriarchy. Like all powerful women, this poet does “not go quietly,” nor does this reader of DEAD SHARK ON THE N TRAIN “reach / the end of the line in the same place [she] / started.” I bow to these painful, vibrant, and galvanizing poems that make change for women’s lives seem more possible.