

REVIEW

A Transcript of the Unspeakable — A Review of “If My House Has a Voice” by Elina Katrin

by Sofija Popovska

If My House Has A Voice



Elina Katrin

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, to a Russian mother and a Syrian father, Los Angeles-based poet and creative Elina Katrin weaves together diverse cultural influences, sensory details, and memory fragments in her debut chapbook, *If My House Has a Voice*, published in the fall of 2023 by Newfound. Vibrant, playful, and vulnerable, her poetry delves deep into generational trauma, rebels against conventions, and explores the turmoil of young adult immigration. Seeking to convey the elusive, such as childlike wonder or the silent guilt of a bystander witnessing an injustice, Katrin deftly crafts a unique, expansive poetic voice, comprising three languages, visual elements, and absences.

In the private ontology of *If My House Has a Voice*, human beings are snails. We carry our homes with us wherever we go — their scents, sounds, and images are inextricably fused with our bodies and layered over every new experience; they create the uniquely textured picture of the world that reflects back to ourselves, showing us who we are. Despite this abstract, mnemonic quality that allows Katrin’s St. Petersburg home and Syrian heritage to follow her into a new life in Southern California, their presence is also sensory, tactile. Here, home isn’t limited to the people and cultures that leave their mark, nor to the rules and ways of thinking we pick up as we move through life. It is also somatic intensity: the joy of food, the anguish of pain, and the excess meaning attached to our homes that refuses to be subsumed by a concept and can only be understood by the body. Katrin embraces the paradox of home as a concept, its inscrutable movement between abstraction and physiology, kinship and exile, and casts it into a language uniquely her own. A bricolage of languages, emojis, and blacked-out spaces, her voice is unencumbered by monolingual conventions and totalizing images: Her boundary-defying, border-crossing verse is unapologetically personal, yet so achingly relatable, it feels like a homecoming.



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Katrin’s verse has an immediate visceral force that makes it *felt* before it is understood. The first lines of “Bloodline,” a coming-of-age poem about scraped knees and rebellion, strum the body like an experienced harpist, momentarily transporting the reader into the speaker’s physical experience: “In Al-Suqaylabiyah I bleed. Warmth slips / down my shins like urine but it is red and I am / happy, so happy I could almost burst.” Familial wounds opened by the

speaker's father, who rages because "Girls aren't / supposed to have purple / kissed knees," are sutured by a loving mother who "hydrogen peroxides my wounds," yet is herself hurt — "she / is an untamed ocean of sorrow, / thrashing from shore to shore." *If My House Has a Voice* is haunted by an undercurrent of paternal cruelty counterposed by maternal nurture: In "Bloodline" (and several other poems), it is reflected in the physical shape of the text. Every two lines, the text's alignment shifts to the opposite side, creating a negotiation of sorts. In some poems, this format evokes the push-and-pull of family dynamics; in others the negotiations between those parts of the speaker's identity who feel at home in the U.S. and those that feel alienated. In every case, this format conveys a physical sense of tidal movement between intimacy and rejection — unending, confusing, and achingly recognizable to those with a mixed cultural background.

Tossed between cruelty and kindness via Katrin's fast-release imagery, the readers of "Bloodline" themselves become the confused yet scrappy little girl, forced to negotiate between the desires and disappointments of adults, to bridge the gap between cultures and people. Here, language comes into play — and with it the unspeakable. The young speaker must convey her mother's words to her Syrian grandfather: "*Tell him what happened*, mother begs me / in Russian." The speaker's resolve is electric: "Arabic sticks to my tongue / like gum to the sidewalk, messy / but sturdy. I know how to chew." Still, it falls short of what is truly being asked of her: Instead of relating how she scraped her knees (and provoked her father's ire), she is supposed to communicate her mother's pain — a translation that isn't linguistic but spiritual, a true *metempsychosis*: "Mama says / I dig the wrong wound. / *Tell him your father betrayed me, tell him how much / it hurts me...*" At this point, the little girl asks herself a question that has exasperated countless writers and translators: "How does a daughter translate the / immensity of despair indented / in the hollowness of her / mother's clavicle, camouflaged / in a language barrier, burrowed into / silence?" The ineffable language of her mother's clavicle, of what an academic might call the Real and a layman might understand as the unspeakable truth of suffering, lies beyond linguistic conventions, which seem useless in its presence. Elsewhere, bilingualism itself becomes a hamper, the rules and sounds of different languages getting tangled and producing embarrassment: "My blood is half-ready to fuel / my tongue in Arabic but the words coming out sound / scalding-cold Slavic, blushing my cheeks fuchsia..."

With this, *If My House Has a Voice* shows that expression cannot be exhausted with the use of one language or another, nor can it be fully achieved via a mix of several. Language,

inextricable from culture and tradition, is not only comforting and crucial to the self — it is also limiting, laden with trauma, prone to make us repeat our ancestors' mistakes. In "Call This Anguish Home," inheritance is laced with hurt, and the home is tainted by the cruelty of the speaker's father — suffocating and transforming her into a powerless "caricature of a warrior." In "Pickled Tradition," the cozy rite of making preserves becomes a metaphor for political inertia achieved via bottling up rebellious impulses: "When *pravitelstvo* gives out orders, we chew them up / and swallow." The ties between words and their meanings, solidified via cultural habits, threaten to keep us stagnant. "Pickled Tradition" illuminates this vicious genealogy, foretelling a "hint of crop, / the next generation's roots that sprout already rotten." The limitations of culture and tradition aren't the only thing that stands in the way of expression: What of the sensual, sensory realities that refuse to be subordinated to intellectualization? What of the subliminal and suppressed? These experiences are as real as that which can be spoken, and nevertheless making them conspicuous in a text remains a daunting task. Katrin has found a solution: Like the fierce little girl in "Bloodline," the only way to transcribe the unspeakable is by becoming an "adventure-catcher," to create a language that rebels against monolingualism and writing conventions altogether.



"If My House Has a Voice"

"Portraits of America" and "I Must Not See" prove Katrin's unapologetic pioneer spirit, stretching the definition of what it means to speak. The former, a multiperspectival mix of languages, fonts, and emojis, draws its power from its playful openness. The lines "My sister's ? ?????? ? lets children / bring iPads to school, and in Russia she is ?" possess surprising clarity — with their rich use of emojis, they are infused with both childlike fun and body language, coming closer to a real conversation than a traditional poem might. The latter poem is, in contrast, "closed" in a very literal sense: Most of the words in it are blacked out. "This is a self-erasure poem," Katrin explains in the notes attached to the chapbook. Again, its clarity is incontestable. Blank spaces flank the phrases "a seventeen-year-old girl," "her backpack weeping water, band-aids, tissues," "people forming a ring / of shoulders strong enough to withstand ... baton strikes". We know what happened; the blacked out spaces speak of injustice that must be mentally repressed to make existence possible. If copied and pasted into a Word document, the blacked-out words reveal themselves, and the poem becomes fully legible. I will not betray its content here, but I will say that the effect

produced by both censored and uncensored versions of the poem is almost identical. The rage and suffering at its heart are maintained in both; the shame of needing to block these out in order to go on, however, is only made visible by the censored poem. Thus Katrin proves to us that words alone aren't enough: Where weakness, or suffering, or a confluence of the two render us silent, only silence itself can speak. Her achievement — an artistic choice that has especially delighted me as a reader — is making silence visible instead of hiding it in implication and ellipsis.

Ever rebellious and trailblazing, Katrin expands every theme and tool that she explores in *If My House Has a Voice*, making “home” not only a comfort and a burden but also a springboard for experimentation. Revealing formative experiences in an unabashed, authentic way, her newly minted language looks the uncomfortable in the eye, making passivity visible, and, thus, impossible. It also grants every perspective articulation on its own terms, such as in “Portraits of America,” where her family members speak in their own unique voices instead of being translated by a unifying authorial presence. In “Base of Fire,” Katrin urges her sister “to lick the rim / of destiny / then smash it / shatter away / when I say sister / you come out / *soldier*.” Her chapbook shows not only that her sister has a role-model to inspire her, but also that weary readers who feel exiled in an age of pastiche finally have something truly new to come home to.