

“I was once so terrified of my own contentment / I bit my shoulder / and drew blood,’ confesses a speaker in Gabrielle Bates’s stellar debut, *Judas Goat*, which thinks through our luck and lot with great humanity, grace, and precision. In disbelief, you’ll want to pinch yourself while reading . . . no need. Believe me, *Judas Goat* is just *that* good.”

—NICOLE SEALEY, AUTHOR OF *ORDINARY BEAST*

“Gabrielle Bates announces herself as a poet of compassion, precision, and heartbreak in all its myriad ways—in *Judas Goat*, the poet studies and upends stories of suffering in both human and animal worlds. Radiating with the curiosity and wonder of a medieval painter, the poet’s refreshing voice creates a glistening world of religious, mythic, pagan, and modern images which interrogate the cruelties in our most intimate relationships: lovers, parents, landscapes, and gods. In poems that are both sharp and tender, she writes of effigies and little lambs, of chisels in the hands of mentors, of early marriages, of subway stations, of white ash and the ‘cold blood on the cock of God.’ And yet through all the layers of large and little violences emerges a speaker who believes in love, a voice that yearns for the mysterious otherwhere: ‘I am too dying / of what I don’t know.’ I was stunned by this magnificent debut—here is the voice of a poet I will be reading again and again.”

—ARIA ABER, AUTHOR OF *HARD DAMAGE*

“Inside the slipperiness of language, Gabrielle Bates writes with a precision that is both lush and masterful. Her writing feels like a laser beam dancing under a waterfall, drenched with exquisite diction, ache, and desire. Violence and tenderness are throttled and exposed through human touch and terror, needling the symbolic intensities through the linguistic landscape of animals. Gorgeous questions loom and ricochet throughout *Judas Goat*, a book that has utterly wrecked my heart and left me in awe as I gasp at lines that wake me up to the wild world. Bates writes, ‘If I describe something, anything, long enough, / language will lead me back to wanting it.’ This type of yearning creates dazzling entry points inside poems probing and reaching for God, the South, marriage, friendship, mothers, and mentor poets we see as mothers, grieving, and so much longing, longing, longing bursting throughout this remarkable debut.”

—TIANA CLARK, AUTHOR OF

I CAN'T TALK ABOUT THE TREES WITHOUT THE BLOOD

JUDAS GOAT

GABRIELLE BATES



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

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JUDAS GOAT

THE DOG

He didn't want to tell me. He almost didn't.
It was luck much more than gut that made me ask.
A beer opened an hour earlier than usual,
the desire for conversation. There was no sense in me
that he was in some sort of aftermath.
He said, when I asked, I had a bad day,
or, I had a weird day, I can't remember.
I saw a dog, he said. I was on the train.
A man with a dog on a leash. The man ran and made it
but the dog hesitated outside, and the doors closed—
no, not on his neck—on the leash, trapping it.
The man was inside, and the dog was outside on the platform.
The button beside the door, ringed in light, blinked.
The man was shouting now, hitting the button,
all else silent, the befuddlement
of dog pulled along, the pace slow until it wasn't.
The tunnel the train must pass through leaving the station
is a perfectly calibrated, unforgiving fit.
The dog had a color and a size I don't know,
so it comes to me as legion.
Large. Small. Fur long, or short. White, or gray.
But the man always looks the same.
As I held him against me in our kitchen,
the moment sharpened my eyes. How easily
I could imagine a version of our lives

in which he kept all his suffering secret from me.
I saw the beer on the counter. I saw myself drink it.
When we went to bed, I stared at the back of his head
split between compassion and fury. My nails
gently scratching up his arm, up and down, up and down,
the blade without which the guillotine is nothing.

The body goes into such raptures of obedience.

—Linda Gregg

SHOULD THE FIRST CALF OF WINTER BE WHITE, YOU'RE GOING TO HATE

what it does to you. Cracked pipes. Iced meat furry,

refusing to cook. Before this farm, I lived in a city—
Decembers, my father woke me with a hair dryer
under the covers; sheets lofted like a lung.

I'll always be there. My bed was by the door,

the door of his rusty faucets and spit, the squeal of plastic
curtains sliding to trap the shower, but it didn't matter
how loud his waking ritual; I was always sleeping.

My first job, feigning sleep. I did it down to the cell.

Like frost over floorboards a restlessness spread,
more temperature than word. Will I remember this
pasture in the morning? I was raised at night.

Follow the red glow of brake lights from windowpane

to ceiling, out the door, over roofs until roofs grow rare,
fear the unborn eyes of cows, keep the hand flat
and a crabapple square in the middle—mouth into palm.

In saddle Oxfords I walked past the perfectly cubed hedges

of the church, its pretty windows, a cat stalking behind me
parading its first dead mole, black fuzz at the lips.
I couldn't bear the touch of small animals.

Now I want to gather every creature

whose bones a child might tweeze from an owl's pellet
or find against the rag when cleaning a cat's sick.
This is the loneliness that turns one superstitious.

For I spilled the salt. For I did not knock wood.

IMPERMANENT

If your name will ever not be
gravel in my mouth, I wonder.

A is how public alphabets begin.
A is what I write at the top of your letters.

[Happy Anniversary] A—
[Happy New Year] A—

As a child I was forced
to make a show of saying

I love you, day after day
to a woman with cruel blue eyes.

Now, I say it to you,
and you say it to me.

What a marriage ending looks like
I saw up close before puberty—

financial stress, infidelity—
I do, I do. I do, I do, I do, I do—

I hear myself say *I'm married* to a room,
and in the room, am the most startled.

I attend a monthly dinner alone
(by which I mean *without you*)

where people share hot tips
for how to be less in debt

then get drunk on wine and convince me
to buy things I don't need.

Growing up, I associated guilt
with wanting anything

except books; good books were safe
if used, if read more than once.

Language was a rewarded vice,
and the Good Book best of all

to be caught eyeing,
though dangerous in its own ways

with its impossible orders like
Walk as a child of light.

To want light. I tried. I did.
My trying has cursed me more than anything.

You say I should be more selfish with my time
because you don't know the hours

I photograph myself
naked to share with no one.

I'm sorry. I love you. I'm a creature
most at home

replenishing my venom under rock.
The entire days of silence:

this is how I knew we could work.
Of all I could seduce, only you could I imagine

crawling over, crawling beneath
for close to a century, curious.

INTRO TO THEATER

I can remember one particular time, in her grandparents' attic,
her legs, slightly older than mine, shaved amphibian-smooth,
her breath around my face like an evaporated puddle.
Naked or almost, in semidarkness, her blue eyes
dusk. We wouldn't allow our mouths to touch.
She'd hold her hand over mine and tongue her own knuckles.
Each time was the last time until the real last time,
which felt more like a beginning. Earth on the third day.
Alluvium. Swamp lily. Wax myrtle. Rose mallow.
Adam would kiss me in a similar way not long after,
as part of the school play, using his thumb to make a barrier
between our lips, and all our classmates would watch us.
I was bleeding from my center, I remember, the moment
his hand made contact with my face—forgettable
line he'd scrawled in blue ink risking to smear
across my cheek. So much time passed
between the kiss and the ending. I remember thinking
it seemed like the applause was for our deaths.